iTrack
Online mentoring program

Connecting for Careers

The iTrack Online
Youth Mentoring Program

October 2007

THE SMITH FAMILY

everyone's family

Connecting for Careers

The iTrack On-line Youth Mentoring Program

The Smith Family

List and copies of available publications may be obtained by contacting:

Research and Evaluation
The Smith Family
Level 8
35 Pitt Street
Sydney NSW 2001

GPO Box 10500
Sydney NSW 2001

Further information may also be found at:
thesmithfamily.com.au

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Contents

Foreword

Few things in the world are more powerful than a positive push in the right direction. As the Australian knowledge economy grows ever more complex, the benefit of receiving tailored guidance and support from an experienced mentor has become an indispensable tool for thousands of individuals looking to succeed in this challenging and competitive environment.

From its origins in the character of 'Mentor' in Homer's epic tale The Odyssey, the concept of providing assistance to youth transitioning into adulthood has become a global phenomenon, underpinned by research pointing to the multiple benefits of supportive relationships between young people and non-parental adults. At the same time, it has evolved from being a casual practice undertaken by neighbours or extended kin to a more formal arrangement carried out as part of a program. This transformation has been powerfully influenced by the recognition of the distinctive capacity of mentoring to assist disadvantaged youth and promote social inclusion. As Nobel Laureate Economist James Heckman notes,

> *"What we know for sure is that these mentoring programs have a big effect, a statistically significant and substantial effect, in having children go to school, keeping them in school, and promoting their absorption into society as fully functioning healthy members."*[1]

Since 1995, youth mentoring has been a defining feature of The Smith Family's mission that 'Together with caring Australians, we will unlock opportunities for disadvantaged families to participate more fully in society'. The nature of our society today is such that not all children and youth have the same opportunities to succeed in life, with many lacking adequate support at critical junctures in their lives where they are confronted with big decisions. In particular, the ability to make smooth transitions from school to work or further education has been shown by research to have a lasting impact on the prosperity of a young person's current and future career pathways.

The ***iTrack*** online youth mentoring program, introduced by The Smith Family in 2003, has been designed specifically with the aim of providing students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds with online access to an adult mentor already established in the working world. With the rise of internet sites such as YouTube and MySpace, not to mention blogs, chat rooms or SMS as a means of communication, ***iTrack*** is unique in harnessing the potential of the Internet to provide a familiar and contemporary context for the traditional mentoring relationship.

The online element of ***iTrack*** was important in being able to connect students in disadvantaged communities with suitable mentors in the corporate world, and for the first three years of the program, students were able to build on this contact through additional face-to-face meetings with their mentor at the beginning, middle and end of the relationship. However, the physical contact made it difficult to include large numbers of students in rural and regional areas, who would have to travel long distances to participate in these face to face meetings.

With a view to breaking down this geographical barrier and extending ***iTrack*** more widely across Australia, The Smith Family took the decision in 2006 to divide the program participants into two cohorts: the first with access to face-to-face contact with their mentor, and the second undertaking a purely online relationship. As an evidence-based organisation committed to following a 'research > policy > practice' continuum, The Smith Family monitored this iteration closely to assess any differences in program outcomes these two cohorts might exhibit. The findings – detailed in this report – were extremely positive, suggesting that offering ***iTrack*** on a purely online basis would not have any detrimental impact on the benefits felt by students. In fact, the evidence suggests that the anonymity of a purely online relationship can in some instances enhance levels of frankness and disclosure, leaving young people free to open up more about their fears and concerns.

In accordance with the findings from this report, ***iTrack*** has since been rolled out more widely to involve students in many hard to reach locations in NSW, QLD, WA and VIC. The Smith Family is also in the process of developing an Indigenous version of ***iTrack***, which will continue the exciting progress we have made in creating a more caring and cohesive Australia.

Elaine Henry
Chief Executive Officer
The Smith Family

1 James Heckman, University of Chicago, quoted in Yoo, I. (2004) 'Mentoring swells into a movement', *USA Today*, January 25, 2004.

Executive Summary

iTrack (previously titled 'On-Track') is an online mentoring program focusing on the school to work transition. It aims to provide students with opportunities to develop appropriate relationships with supportive adults other than a teacher or parent, and to provide information to students about workplace, study and career opportunities to enhance their school to work / further study transition. Developed in 2003 using seed funding from The Westpac Foundation and progressive collaboration with IBM and Plan-It Youth Lake Macquarie, *iTrack* has since run three times as a pilot program in 2003, 2004 and 2005 with increasing success. Most recently, with the support of American Express, it was rolled out more widely in 2006 as part of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of programs.[2]

The program works by matching secondary school students with a range of adult professionals primarily drawn from The Smith Family's corporate partners, who then engage in a predominantly online relationship over the course of approximately two school terms (or around 19 weeks). The bulk of the mentoring takes place on a weekly basis through The Smith Family's *IGNITE!* web site chat rooms and IBM's MentorPlace site,[3] with students attending specially allocated classes in which they have the opportunity to 'chat' electronically with mentors, or leave messages for mentors. In this respect, the participating schools and the facilitators play a critical role in providing access to the program and support for the students in managing their time. Direct email communication is not employed, as this is less amenable to appropriate third party supervision.

The initial three pilot phases (2003-05) included multiple face-to-face meetings at commencement, mid-point and conclusion of the program, helping to build rapport between student and mentor. With the wider roll-out of *iTrack* in 2006, a 'test' group of mentors and students participated in the program without any face-to-face contact, alongside a 'control' group who met their mentors in person at the start, middle and end of the course. The aim was to determine what impact (if any) taking out the face-to-face component would have on the outcomes of *iTrack*, and whether this would jeopardize the future nationwide roll-out of the program in this form.

The findings are presented in full in this report, and include the following Key Learnings:

1. **Students who do not participate in face-to-face meetings with their mentors during the program do not appear to be in any way disadvantaged by this in terms of the program outcomes** (e.g. skills development, knowledge enhancement). In fact, this evaluation found that across a range of indicators, students without face-to-face contact were actually more positive in rating their experiences, including (a) feeling more comfortable communicating with their mentor; (b) perceiving mentoring as a valuable experience; (c) becoming friends with their mentor; and (d) enjoying the program in general.

2. **Previous experience of being mentored themselves is a strong motivating factor for mentors volunteering to participate in *iTrack***, and there is a high incidence of mentors continuing their role to different students over time, if not necessarily successive years.

3. **Having an adult to talk to who is not a parent or teacher is one of the most important factors in students' decisions to participate in *iTrack***. This confirms that family members and school career advisors are not always in themselves sufficient or approachable resources for students looking to negotiate their post-school plans.

4. **Mentors were able to identify five different aspects in their approach to mentoring that were particularly successful in terms of building positive and productive relationships with their students.** These were: (1) Honesty and trust; (2) Being open about themselves and their backgrounds; (3) Continuity, in the sense of maintaining awareness of how previous sessions can shape future sessions; (4) Thinking one step ahead, in terms of pre-empting what questions the student might ask and what information might be most useful to them; and (5) Avoiding a teacher-like approach, i.e. ensuring that mentoring sessions are more democratic and conversational rather than prescriptive and authoritarian in nature.

2 See The Smith Family Evaluation Reports for 2003, 2004 and 2005 for more details.

3 See Appendix A for an overview of the IBM MentorPlace site, or visit www.mentorplace.org

5. **Participating students gain both skills development and knowledge enhancement through the relationships they build with *iTrack* mentors.** This is because the interaction is both personal and educational in nature, assisting students with interpersonal skills and self-confidence alongside guidance on career pathways.

6. **Mentors gain a variety of skills from participating in the program,** including (a) a greater understanding of a younger generation; (b) insight into the life of someone with a different background; (c) knowledge of the complexity of post-school pathways open to students within the present-day education system; and (d) improvement in their own interpersonal skills, e.g. as a listener and advisor.

The 2006 rollout of ***iTrack*** has, according to the data collected from students and mentors involved in this evaluation, been a great success. In addition to the Key Learnings outlined above, the following statistics provide insights into how ***iTrack*** has achieved its objectives:

Students

- 94.7% reported that their mentor had given them useful information.
- 92.1% felt that being mentored had been a valuable experience for them.
- 90.8% enjoyed participating in the program.
- 85.1% agreed that it was beneficial having an adult to talk to who was not a family member or teacher.
- 81.6% confirmed that they had a better understanding of career pathways as a result of participating in ***iTrack***.

> "Thanks for helping us do this special program – keep it up!"
>
> "This was really awesome. Thanks heaps to our mentors and the Smith Family program."
>
> "I would like to continue ***iTrack*** through Years 11 and 12 so that I can turn to someone to help me make decisions..."

Mentors

- 96.2% felt that mentoring had been a valuable experience for them.
- 96.2% felt that they had established a rapport with their student.
- 90.6% felt that ***iTrack*** had been a success.

> "I felt fortunate to be part of this project and will certainly be promoting it with AMP for 2007"
>
> "I strongly enjoyed the experience and would like to be invited to continue next year."
>
> "I think it's a great program and if you need me, see you in 2007!"

These findings consolidate and advance those of previous ***iTrack*** evaluations, and are strongly supportive of the need for The Smith Family and corporate partners to **continue expanding the program to support more and more students nationwide.**

Introduction

The importance of the school to work / further education transition

The idea of 'pathways' from school to work and further education has influenced most post-compulsory education policy in Australia since the 1980s, and was a key concept in the landmark 'Finn Review' report by the Australian Education Council Review Committee, which described it as:

> *...movement through a coherent set of educational and employment experiences leading to some identified destination, which may also be a link into a subsequent pathway.*[4]

Research by The Smith Family and others has suggested that this assumed linearity is in practice experienced more as a fractured multi-dimensionality in young people's lives.[5] In light of this, the concept of 'transitions' from education to work need to be expanded to encompass broader conceptions of youth and adulthood that focus on more than the study / work dichotomy. The range and diversity of pathways open to students today is so considerable that following a linear career trajectory is a non sequitur, with portfolio careers now the accepted mantra. Yet the ability to make informed choices as to routes within this maze, and to access appropriate information, guidance and support remains relatively poor and inconsistent, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Too often, these kinds of services – whether classroom or counsellor based – are marginalised within schools, or function simply to steer higher achieving students into tertiary education and other lower achievers into 'subordinate' vocational training or poor quality jobs. A lack of institutionalised bridges between vocational training, apprenticeship and tertiary education further exacerbate this artificial binary division, reducing the likelihood of students on either path of fully understanding the flexibility or range of their options.

Sign-posting pathways through education and training

The key challenge for policy in relation to multiple pathways is to ensure not only that students are adequately informed of the variety of routes available, but also to create solid linkages and coherent qualification frameworks of which they may take advantage as their needs and learning progress.[6] Research has shown that no one type of pathway – whether apprenticeship, school-based vocational or general education – holds the keys to consistently successful transitional outcomes, which suggests that policy should seek to avoid emphasising some routes above others and rather ensure that such pathways are well organised, accessible and clearly defined. Encouraging students to pursue their interests along a mix of pathways will then help them to develop a greater variety of general, technical, vocational, personal and work-related skills that can increase their overall employability.

However, understanding the best way in which to equip students – particularly disadvantaged students – with the information, guidance and support needed to confidently negotiate these paths remains a significant policy challenge. Many schools utilise approaches that seek to 'match' a student's perceived abilities to a particular job or course rather than assisting them to develop more active self-assessment and career planning skills through a lifelong learning perspective. Others have introduced computer-based packages to fill the gap, but both of these approaches tend to be effective only in the context of additional sources of advice and support. Moreover, they have difficulty in adapting rapidly enough to changing course and job requirements in the broader work environment. The Smith Family has taken numerous steps towards mitigating this problem through collaborative research into mentoring strategies, and now manages a large team of volunteers from a range of professional fields who provide accurate and up to date advice for students at various stages of the *Learning for Life* suite of programs.[7]

4 Finn, B. (1991) *Young People's Participation in Post-compulsory Education and Training,* Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee, AGPS, Canberra, p94.

5 Dearn, L. (2001) 'Negotiating the Maze: an analysis of employment assistance for young people', Brotherhood of St Laurence Briefing Paper, May 2001. Victoria: Brotherhood of St Laurence. The Smith Family (2002) *School to adult life transitions through work and study: A select review of the literature.* Background Paper No.4, The Smith Family: Sydney.

6 A good example of a coherent framework of this nature in practice is the Gippsland Education Precinct, a $14 million post-compulsory education development centre in Victoria that brings secondary school students in contact with Gippsland Group Training, Gipps TAFE and Monash University facilities through a range of clearly articulated and connected pathways. For more on this initiative, see http://www.gippsland.monash.edu.au/campus/gep/.

7 For more on the mentoring components of The Smith Family's community programs (e.g. Plan-It Youth, eXLR8, Student2Student and On Track), see our web site, www.thesmithfamily.com.au

Accessing appropriate information

Who students confide in when making decisions about their education and career should be a key factor in related policy development. Research conducted by The Smith Family has shown that just under 75% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds turn to their parents or wider family, as opposed to a career counsellor (19%), a teacher (26%) or friends (27%).[8] This suggests a relatively high degree of trust and support between parents and their children, and reflects The Smith Family's dual generational approach of providing information and support not just to students but to their parents as well. Policy must enhance the knowledge capacity and engagement of parents in the educational process if it is to lead to outcomes that are both positive and sustainable.

Ensuring information is timely and appropriate is also of importance for effective education policy, particularly in light of research by The Smith Family, which has suggested that students in Australia begin considering their career pathways from an earlier age than schools or parents usually begin providing advice.[9] 70% of students surveyed while in Years 8 and 9 were able to nominate an occupation they would like to do by age 25, while two-thirds had already planned to complete Year 12. That students form clear vocational and educational goals so early on was a significant finding, but of greater concern was the fact that around one-third of those students who had nominated their desired occupation were planning an education that would be at too low a level to achieve this. Of this group, 70% still expected that they would get this job, suggesting a significant lack of realistic guidance, information and support in forming these goals. Moreover, boys were more likely than girls to have a mismatch between their planned education level and the skill level of their preferred job, reconfirming the need for gender specialisation within policy strategies relating to information provision.[10]

8 The Smith Family (2002) *Reducing the barriers to educational participation: An initial assessment of student's views of Learning for Life.* Internal Report, The Smith Family: Sydney.

9 The Smith Family (2005) *What do Students think of Work? Are they on the right page?* The Smith Family: Sydney.

10 For details, see The Smith Family (2005) *What do Students think of Work? Are they on the right page?* The Smith Family: Sydney.

The iTrack Online Mentoring program

iTrack (previously titled 'On-Track') is an online mentoring program focusing on the school to work transition. It aims to provide students with opportunities to develop appropriate relationships with supportive adults other than a teacher or parent, and to provide information to students about workplace, study and career opportunities to enhance their school to work / further study transition. Developed in 2003 using seed funding from The Westpac Foundation, ***iTrack*** has since run three times as a pilot program in 2003, 2004 and 2005 with increasing success. Most recently, with the support of American Express, it was rolled out more widely in 2006 as part of *The Smith Family's Learning for Life* suite of programs.[11]

The program works by matching secondary school students with a range of adult professionals primarily drawn from The Smith Family's corporate partners, who then engage in a predominantly online relationship over the course of approximately two terms (or 19 weeks). The bulk of the mentoring takes place on a weekly basis through The Smith Family's *IGNITE!* web site chat rooms and IBM's MentorPlace site, with students attending specially allocated classes in which they have the opportunity to 'chat' electronically with mentors, or leave messages for mentors. In this respect, the participating schools and the facilitators play a critical role in providing access to the program and support for the students in managing their time. Direct email communication is not employed, as this is less amenable to appropriate third party supervision.

11 See folllowing section, 'Findings from previous iTrack evaluations' for details.

Findings from previous iTrack Evaluations

2003 – 'On-Track'

For the first pilot of ***iTrack*** (then called 'On-Track'), The Smith Family selected an area of low socioeconomic status area in the Lake Macquarie district of NSW, and two Year 10 classes participated throughout Term Three (approximately 10 weeks) of 2003. The evaluation concluded that:

- Many mentors expressed disappointment and frustration and believed the students had learnt very little from their involvement in the project, suggesting a need to engage with and temper mentor expectations of the project from an early stage.
- 82% of students enjoyed the program, and almost two-thirds of students felt *On-Track* helped them decide whether they wanted to undertake further education or look for work, with the same proportion of students felt they had a better understanding of possible career paths.
- Only 44.1% of mentors who completed an evaluation survey agreed or strongly agreed that *On-Track* was a success. Over one in three mentors (38.2%) did not feel that they made a valuable contribution to the pilot.
- Half of all mentors were unable to access *IGNITE!* because of firewalls within their workplace, 56% also reported it a difficult website to navigate and only 23.5% were satisfied with the site. The majority of students (64.3%) were also dissatisfied with *IGNITE!*.
- At the end of the program 41.1% of mentors and 46.5% of students agreed that the program should have been longer. Extra time was needed to further build on relationships, or to move on from developing a bond.

2004 – Voluntary participation, better technology

In 2004, On-Track was renamed '***iTrack***' and piloted for a second time, with adjustments to take into account some of the challenges and experiences revealed in the 2003 Evaluation Report. 21 Year 11 students from three high schools in NSW participated. These students were mentored over a 15-week period via The Smith Family's chat room, *IGNITE!* and IBM's website, MentorPlace. Significant changes to the program included making participation voluntary (rather than arbitrary, as in 2003) and involving Year 11 students rather than Year 10. The 2004 evaluation found that:

- Compared to the 2003 pilot, students had clearer objectives of why they were involved and mentor expectations were more restrained and feasible. The latter was the result of mentor training provided by The Smith Family that was specifically designed to address this issue.
- 95% of students who participated in ***iTrack*** enjoyed the program and agreed that it had helped them with career / training advice and developing communication skills. 71% felt they had a better understanding of career paths as a consequence of their involvement.
- 83% of mentors agreed that ***iTrack*** had been a success – a marked improvement on the 44.1% in 2003. The mentors were also far more satisfied with the technology and websites used for the mentoring: 94% and 83% for *IGNITE!* and MentorPlace respectively.
- Despite extending the program from 10 to 15 weeks, two-thirds of students still felt that the timeframe was not long enough.
- More information was needed to increase students' understanding of the program, with less than half agreeing that they had 'a good understanding of the pilot and its goals'.

Overall, the 2004 pilot flowed significantly more smoothly than the first iteration, with more successful outcomes across the board. However, the inclusion of new schools, coupled with the small number of students in the 2004 program, gave credence to the need for another similarly adjusted pilot in 2005. It was also suggested in the 2004 evaluation that the development of a purely online version of ***iTrack*** (without face-to-face meetings) would then be the next logical step following the 2005 pilot.[12]

12 This eventuated in the 'test and 'control' groups participating in the 2006 iteration of iTrack.

2005 – Extended timeframes, new surveys

The 2005 pilot of the ***iTrack*** program included a number of adjustments designed to improve some of the challenges encountered in previous iterations. Firstly, the program was extended once more to run across Terms 3 and 4 of the school year – approximately 19 weeks, instead of the previous 10 and 15 week timeframes. Secondly, a new survey was introduced for the School Facilitators, recognizing the critical role that these individuals play in maintaining student attendance and program momentum.

In 2004, mentor support was given special attention and a system of sending weekly update emails to mentors was started. The same process was incorporated into the 2005 pilot in order to keep mentors in the loop with the progress of the program, provide tips on how to handle communication issues, and advice as to what information students may need.

The 2005 pilot of ***iTrack*** had the following positive outcomes:

- 95% of mentors found the experience valuable, with the majority citing personal skill development (e.g. communication) as a key part of this. In addition, 90% felt that they had established a positive rapport with their student.

- 100% of the students mentored felt they had benefited from having an adult to talk to who was not a parent or a teacher. 93% of students also felt they had benefited from the career / training advice from their mentor, and improved their communication skills.

- Overall, 92% of the students found the program a valuable experience. 4 out of 5 students on the program planned to continue their learning, which is a great result in light of The Smith Family's focus on lifelong learning.

The school facilitator surveys also added a new layer of support for the program, with staff providing the following comments:

> *"I'd actually had relatively surface dealings with our e-mentoring kids before the program started. Every week it was clear to see the amazingly positive impact it was having on everyone in the group…"*

> *"We've certainly had a mix of personalities, responsibility and maturity levels, all making progress in gaining the confidence to become more of their own person. It's not easy NOT being a sheep, especially when Year 10 really is crunch time for kids needing to make personal and important decisions about friends, family, education, goals, values and wondering how to go about making an individual future."*

> *"Your mentoring crew has made a difference in more ways than they or the kids will realize. It's never easy to talk about 'important stuff'. This has been a wonderful program for our kids, and a fascinating activity to be part of for me. Thank you so much for persisting and making everything work so well."*

2006 – The role of face-to-face contact

The progression of ***iTrack*** into 2006 involved transitioning the program from its pilot model to a program capable of being rolled out on a much broader scale (in QLD and Sydney-Metropolitan) within the *LFL* framework. This was in response to the need to make the program more widely available, particularly to students in rural areas where opportunities to build this kind of relationship with an adult in their chosen sector are slim.

To facilitate this wider rollout, The Smith Family conducted an international literature review in early 2006 around the advantages and disadvantages of mentoring programs that were purely online (i.e. without face-to-face meetings).[13] On-line mentoring – or 'e-mentoring' – is still a relatively new idea within a field that is tied very strongly to traditional ideas of face-to-face contact as indispensable to developing 'successful' mentoring relationships. Although there is a great deal of evidence on the effectiveness of non-electronic mentoring, much less is understood about the dynamics, contexts or outcomes of online mentoring, especially that which is conducted purely online rather than as a supplement to other forms of contact.

Nevertheless, the Literature Review suggested that face-to-face contact within a mentoring program, while evidently beneficial in many ways to the outcomes, is not necessarily vital to successful mentoring relationships. The critical factors would appear to be rather the overall aims and objectives of the mentoring program and the demographic backgrounds of the mentor / mentees. In addition, purely online mentoring appeared to have some important advantages in comparison to that conducted face-to-face, including confidentiality and anonymity, less prejudicial attitudes among mentors, and the ability to bridge geographical distances that too often prevent potentially valuable mentor / student relationships.

Therefore, while it is obvious that face-to-face contact can and does play an important part in cementing online relationships, the literature review concluded that the evidence for this remains overwhelmingly tied to programs explicitly seeking to inspire emotional outcomes (such as increased self-esteem), as opposed to the ***iTrack*** program, which has an acute focus on facilitating and informing the school-to-work transition. This does not mean that emotional support does not constitute a part of programs

13 See The Smith Family (2006) *The Role of Face-to-Face contact in E-Mentoring – A Literature Review to inform the development of **iTrack** in 2006.* A summary of the literature review is provided in Appendix B of this report.

like *iTrack*, but that previous evaluations have suggested this element to be more of an indirect consequence than a reason for participation in itself. For example, the 2004 *iTrack* evaluation states that "students noted clear reasons for their involvement in the program. They wanted to learn more about careers and the workforce and felt the program would be a useful experience." In contrast, the mentors joined under more emotionally focused expectations 'to make a difference in a young person's life' and 'to give back to the community'.

Following the conclusion of the 2004 pilot, it was found that 95% of the students felt that the program had helped with career / training advice and communication skills. The same majority also believed it had been beneficial to have an adult to talk to who was neither a parent or guardian, compared to just 31% who reported this as a motivating factor to join the program in the first place (The Smith Family, 2005). In other words, the 2004 pilot achieved its informative goals while at the same time producing a range of emotionally-supportive outcomes that, while very welcome, were more of a bonus addition to the program rather than qualifier of its success.

This distinction is important in light of the strongly positive connection raised in the mentoring literature between face-to-face contact and the quality of the mentor / mentee relationship. The 2005 pilot had face-to-face components, but lacked the analytical depth in evaluation to ascertain the extent to which these meetings were partly or solely responsible for the additional emotional outcomes (as the literature would imply). It was therefore equally difficult to say with any certainty whether taking face-to-face meetings out of the program would result in the reduction or even disappearance of these socio-emotional outcomes among students – or indeed whether this would negatively impact a program designed to achieve educational, rather than socio-emotional development.

In sum, the question of whether the *iTrack* program could / should be rolled out without face-to-face contact was seen to depend on how the program objectives and outcomes were prioritized. If additional methods / activities to substitute face-to-face contact were incorporated into the program design and implementation, the evidence suggested that the *educational* success of the program would not likely be damaged in any significant way. If the *socio-emotional* aspect did falter in comparison – which was by no means a certainty – it would be a matter of deciding how far this sacrifice is justified with regard to the substantially greater numbers of students able to benefit from the wider roll-out of the program. In light of the admittedly small evidence base available around online mentoring and the existence of alternative 'relationship-building' strategies, it appeared that the benefits would nevertheless outweigh the drawbacks associated with taking out the face-to-face component. It was also felt, as some observers agree, that instead of continually viewing online mentoring with regard to its predecessor (i.e. face-to-face mentoring), it should be perhaps be understood on the basis of its unique qualities.[14] In any regard, The Smith Family felt that experimenting with a purely online model would in itself contribute valuable data and learning to the relatively poor evidence-base on online mentoring currently available. To this end, the 2006 iteration of *iTrack* included a minority 'test' group of mentors and students who participated in the program without face-to-face contact.

14 Kealy, W.A. & C.A. Mullen (2003) Epilogue: Unresolved questions about mentoring and technology. *Mentoring and Tutoring,* 11, pp119-120.

An Overview of iTrack in 2006

The Mentors

A total of 115 mentors participated in the 2006 rollout of *iTrack* in New South Wales and Queensland, including five who had participated in previous iterations of the program. The process of recruitment was primarily carried out by approaching staff to volunteer from The Smith Family's pool of corporate partners, with the following 11 organizations providing mentors:

American Express

AMP foundation

RIO TINTO – WA FUTURE FUND

Perpetual

Cisco Systems

IBM

Mallesons Stephen Jacques

COLGATE-PALMOLIVE

Westpac

Multiplex

AGL

In Queensland, mentors were also sourced from within the community because of the increased demand. These included individuals from the Queensland Department of Housing, the University of Queensland, small business owners, university students and full-time mothers.

The Students and Schools

iTrack would not be possible without the support and contribution of the participating schools, and particularly of the school facilitators who supervise and provide guidance to students in setting up and maintaining their online relationships. Building close relationships with school staff and students has always been part of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* strategy and suite of programs, and the shared commitment to student welfare and educational advancement is a powerful force behind this partnership.

The 2006 iteration of *iTrack* involved a total of ten schools, comprising 115 mentor-student pairs. This is almost three times the number of mentor-student pairs that participated in 2005[15] (when the program was implemented in Sydney alone), and represented the first time *iTrack* had been offered outside New South Wales. The students who volunteered were drawn from between Years 9 and 11, with the vast majority being from Year 10. The reason why students from Year 9 were included in the program was because of research conducted by The Smith Family and The Australian Council for Educational Research that revealed students are already starting to make post-school plans at this age. In fact, around 70% of junior secondary school students (Years 8 and 9) were able to nominate an occupation that they would like to do at age 25.[16]

The participating five schools in NSW (comprising 52 mentor / student pairs) were all drawn from Sydney suburbs, while those in Queensland (comprising 63 mentor / student pairs) were located in areas around the Brisbane hinterland and beyond (see Table 1.0 on next page).

In 2006, *iTrack* graduated from pilot status and was rolled out as part of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of programs. This meant that school engagement, student recruitment and support were managed by The Smith Family Learning for Life Workers (LFLWs), and were focused around disadvantaged communities where The Smith Family already has an established presence and relationships. This was important in ensuring that the students enrolling in the program were those who could benefit the most from the support that would be provided.

15 A total of 43 mentor-student pairs took part in the 2005 *iTrack* pilot.

16 The Smith Family (2005) *What do students think of work? Are they on the right page?* The Smith Family / ACER: Sydney.

Table 1.0 Schools participating in *iTrack* 2006

New South Wales Schools (52 mentor-student pairs)	Queensland Schools (63 mentor-student pairs)
Alexandria Park Community School[19] *An inner city suburb of Alexandria*	Alexandria Hills State High School *Redland Shire*
Chifley College – Bidwill campus *In the western suburbs, Mount Druitt area*	Chancellor College, Sippy Downs *Sunshine Coast*
Chester Hill High School *In Chester Hill*	Mabel Park State High School *Logan*
Wiley Park Girls High School *In Wiley Park*	Morayfield State High School *Caboolture*
WestField Sports High School *In Fairfield*	Southport State High *Gold Coast*

The Control and Test Groups

As discussed earlier, the initial three pilot phases (2003-05) of ***iTrack*** included multiple face-to-face meetings at commencement, mid-point and conclusion of the program, helping to build rapport between student and mentor. Evaluations showed that both students and mentors overwhelmingly found these meetings beneficial to the mentoring process, predominantly in terms of strengthening the quality of their relationship with each other. However, the necessity of incorporating face-to-face meetings significantly restricted the flexibility of the program in terms of supporting students outside urban suburbs in more rural and remote locations. If ***iTrack*** was to be implemented more widely among those communities where this kind of support could make a real difference, it was necessary for The Smith Family to test the issue of purely online mentoring and provide more concrete evidence from which to better understand its potential. A 'test' group was therefore created within the 2006 ***iTrack*** mentor-student pairs who would have no face-to-face contact throughout the program. Chancellor College and Southport State High, both Queensland schools, were selected for this test group, totalling 27 mentor-student pairs in all. The intention was to then compare the outcomes of this group with those in the larger 'control' group where at least two face-to-face meetings had been organised during the program.

The Timeframe

In 2005, ***iTrack*** was implemented during Terms 3 and 4 of the school year (approx. July–December) but the evaluation report noted a number of unfortunate commitment clashes that this entailed for the students. For example, Year 10 students have school Certificate Exams in the first week of November, and after finishing these they have the option of signing off from school if they have their parents' permission, or if they secure a job placement. Furthermore, many Year 10 students undertake work placements of between one and three weeks during this time, which meant that a significant number of students were not available at school for much of Term 4. Similarly, Year 11 students begin their progression to Year 12 in Term 4, and as a result their workload increases substantially, and extra-curricular programs such as ***iTrack*** start to slip in priority. This was found to be an issue in the 2005 pilot, where student attendance became very irregular from November onwards.

In accordance with these findings, the timing for running ***iTrack*** in 2006 was revised to Terms 2 and 3 (approx. April – September), when the students' potential attention and commitment to the program was expected to be stronger. In Sydney, this shift in timing was smooth, with all schools commencing the program on 8 May 2006, and finishing on 21 September 2006. However, in Queensland, the situation was complicated by the extended wait for the mentor's *Working With Children Checks* (known informally as 'Blue Cards').[18] In some instances, these took 12-14 weeks to be issued rather than the anticipated 6 weeks, and this meant

17 Alexandria Park Community School participated in the 2004 and 2005 pilots of the ***iTrack*** program, and were keen to continue their involvement in the wider roll-out of the program.

18 The Working with Children Check is a detailed national check of a person's criminal history, including any charges or convictions. Also considered is disciplinary information held by certain professional organisations (teachers, child care licensees, foster carers, nurses, midwives and certain health practitioners), and police investigative information about allegations of serious child related sexual offending. The Working with Children Check is conducted by the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian to determine whether a person is eligible for a blue card. If a person is considered eligible, they are issued with a positive notice letter and a blue card. See www.childcomm.qld.gov.au for details.

that *iTrack* in Queensland had a slightly staggered start. All but one of the schools were eventually able to run the program in Terms 2 and 3, but at Chancellor College it ran across Terms 3 and 4.

Previous iterations of *iTrack* have tested varying durations of the program, from 10 weeks in 2003 to 15 weeks in 2004 and finally 19 weeks in 2005. Successive evaluations consistently showed each year a strong desire among mentors and particularly students to extend the program. However, for the 2006 rollout, the duration of the program was maintained at 19 weeks so that the impact of taking out the face-to-face component would not be contaminated by any other significant changes in program structure.

The Evaluation Surveys

Various evaluation surveys were developed and administered across the implementation of *iTrack* between 2003-05, each successive version building on or incorporating the recommendations of previous evaluations in terms of appropriate questions, terminology and structure. For the 2006 rollout of *iTrack*, four sets of evaluation surveys were developed to assess the outcomes of mentors and students:

(1) A **Pre-program** survey assessing motivations and expectations prior to participation. Students completed these immediately after their Induction session, while mentors were given the opportunity to complete theirs online after their training.

(2) A **Progress** survey tracking experiences mid-way through the program, administered only to participants in Queensland. The survey was emailed to mentors to complete online, while The Smith Family's Learning for Life Workers (LFLWs) in QLD administered the survey first-hand with the relevant students.[19]

(3) A **Post-program** survey evaluating mentor and student outcomes. This was completed by students and mentors immediately following their final face-to-face meeting or, in the case of the test group, after completing their final chat session online.

(4) A **School Facilitator** survey assessing their experience in organizing the program. This was sent out to School Facilitators at the same time as the Post-program surveys (see above).

Those in the non-face-to-face 'test' group were given exactly the same surveys as those in the control groups, excluding one question in the Post-program survey which directly asked mentors and students to discuss the impact the face-to-face meetings may have had on their experience. This was done to see whether the test group felt the lack of face-to-face was enough of an issue to bring it up of their own accord, and to avoid biasing their responses by suggesting – however implicitly – that their program may have been lacking in some way.

19 The reason for administering the Progress survey only to mentor-student pairs in Queensland in 2006 was because previous evaluations had judged the inclusion of this survey unnecessary for future iterations of *iTrack* on the basis that the resources expended in its administration were not justified by the data collected. Program developers were also conscious of the need to avoid 'survey fatigue' among participants. However, it was felt that as Queensland was the first location for the rollout of *iTrack* outside NSW, this extra level of data may be more useful in terms of tracking potential impacts of the new context.

Student Induction & Mentor Training

During the weeks prior to commencing ***iTrack***, both students and mentors were required to attend sessions to familiarise them with how the program operates. These were convened by a member of The Smith Family with longitudinal experience of running the program, so that an accurate portrait of what to expect could be communicated. Although necessarily tailored to their particular audiences, the sessions covered the following cross-cutting areas:

- how the program would work (e.g. how often they would / could communicate online);
- information on the mentors / students (e.g. their background and motivation for enrolling)
- what to expect from a mentoring relationship
- guidelines for using the technology employed in ***iTrack*** (e.g. the MentorPlace and *IGNITE!* sites)
- information regarding confidentiality, duty of care, appropriate interaction etc.
- contact details should they require assistance or have further questions during the program.

Most importantly, these preliminary sessions function to ensure that students and particularly mentors do not commence the program with unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved. As these mentors remarked:

> *"I came away impressed from the training. The program looks well organised and isn't too ambitious. I think achieving the goals of helping kids is achievable."*

> *"It helped to clarify the roles and expectations of both mentor and mentee. Raised my awareness of the likely stages we may experience in the relationship. Made me more confident with handling any difficulties in mentoring."*

Following the training, the majority of students (87.3%) and mentors (96.2%) felt that they were equipped with a good understanding of ***iTrack*** and its goals, and 81.8% of students were confident that the program would help them decide what to do after they left school. In addition, both students and mentors felt comfortable using the technology that the program relied on (80% and 92.5% respectively).

As the training provided to mentors was necessarily longer (consisting of five hours split over two evenings) and more in-depth than for students, extra questions were included in their Pre-program survey to gauge their feedback. In similar findings to previous evaluations, 86.8% agreed that the training had made them feel more confident in taking on their role as a mentor; 94.3% reported that the training and resource handbook was useful; and 86.8% confirmed that the pace of the workshop had provided sufficient time for discussion. As this mentor observed:

> *"The team did a great job on the training, fitting in a considerable amount of information and discussion in the short time frame. It would be useful to have some more of the training material incorporated into the handbook."*

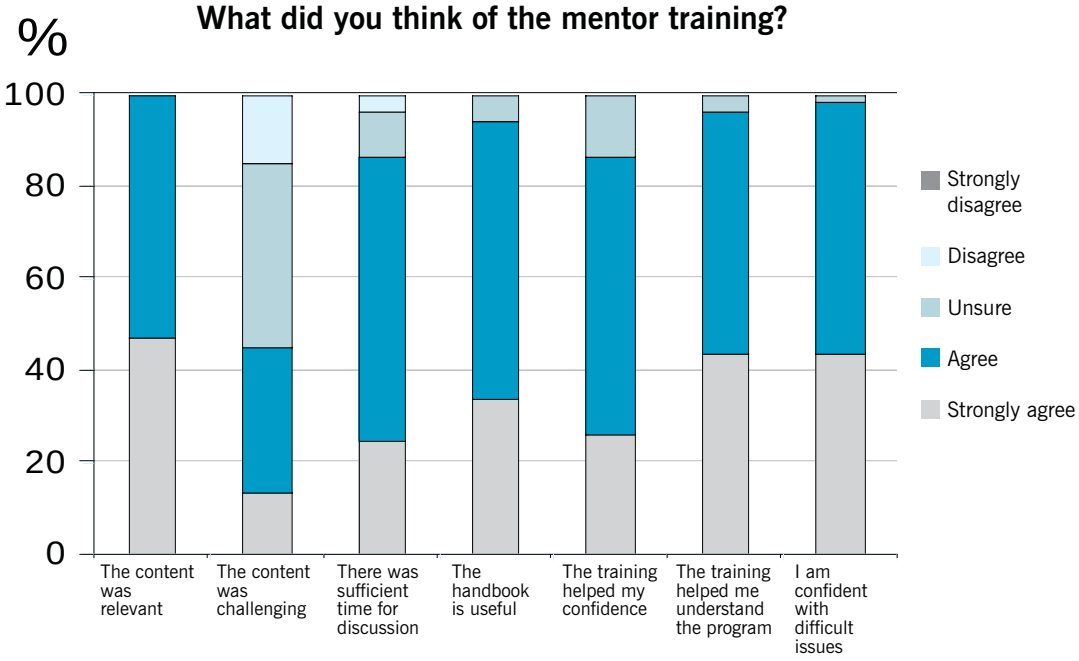
Importantly, 98.1% of mentors felt that they had been given adequate guidelines regarding how to manage issues such as uncomfortable topics, child protection concerns, confidentiality and duty of care, as well as contact details for those who they could call on for support:

> *"The training was comprehensive, relevant and well paced. Although some of the sensitive issues were well covered, I am sure that if / when I was faced with the situation it will be a difficult situation to handle. For that reason it was good to know the facilitators are a phone call away and will also be reading the transcripts to assist us in picking up on any issues the student might have. I would hate to think I missed picking up on any signs that the student required additional support."*

Overall, the mentors appeared extremely happy with the quality and content of the training, and expressed pride and excitement in being involved. As these mentors observed:

> *"All the presenters / trainers were articulate, enthusiastic and well informed. It made me feel very comfortable about the type of organisation The Smith Family is and served to reinforce my decision to volunteer for this program through this group. Suffice to say that I am very much looking forward to commencing work on the program and hope my student gets as much out of it as I am sure I will."*

> *"Both training sessions were run with a great degree of professionalism and enthusiasm by the trainers. It was really helpful hearing about what happened during the last year's program so we can get a good insight into what we are up for. [The trainer] is very passionate about this program and it comes across in the training. I'm really looking forward to starting this week."*



At the same time, a number of mentors put forward suggestions for how they thought the training could improve. Some were particularly disappointed not to actually get hands-on online experience during the session:

"It would be better if we actually used the online tools during training."

"Perhaps more time could be spent on the technology involved."

"Needed more time in training going over connecting to chat room. Facilitator couldn't fully go through as no internet connection made – rushed through IGNITE! & MentorPlace."

Others suggested that having two training sessions was perhaps too long, and that the material presented could be communicated more precisely:

"Went too long, could have been an hour shorter."

"The first session was a bit slow, could have been completed in 2 hours."

"I thought the training was very good although it went on for too long. I read the booklet the day after the first training and I found this be informative and this is the reason why I found the training to be quite long as it was all covered in here. I would suggest providing the booklet before the training and outlining the main topics from the booklet in the training rather than going through everything."

iTrack Motivations

This section draws upon data collected in the Pre-Program surveys, and relates mentor and students' reasons for participating in the program, along with any previous experience they may have had of mentoring.

MENTORS [20]

A consistent finding within mentoring research is that *'the attitudes, expectations and styles of the volunteers are the most salient factors in determining how, and into what types, relationships evolved'.*[21] Two major types of relationship have been identified with different patterns of interaction: (1) Developmental, and (2) Prescriptive. Mentors in each type of relationship commence their matches with distinctly different expectations regarding the needs of the youth, the goals of the match, and their purpose as a mentor (see Table 1 right).

Compared with prescriptive matches, developmental matches tend to last longer and are more likely to be described in positive terms by both mentors and youth.[22] However, both types are common, even within mentoring programs that are focused around one particular objective (in the case of ***iTrack***, facilitating smoother school-to-work transitions for disadvantaged students). Interestingly, although mentors were aware that they had important knowledge and experiences to impart to their prospective students around the world of work, the vast majority appeared to anticipate developmental, rather than prescriptive (authoritarian) relationships. As the chart on the following page shows, 'Helping a student' and 'community involvement' were the two most important reasons for enrolling:

Table 1: Types of mentoring relationships

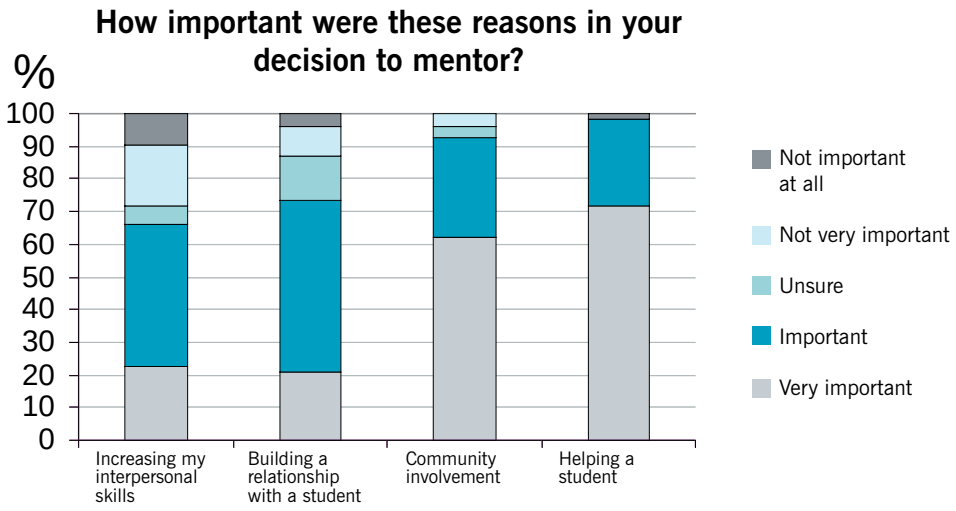
Developmental relationships	Mentors conceive of their role as a friend to the youth. These mentors believe they should meet the needs of the youth by being flexible and supportive, incorporating the youth's preferences, and building a solid relationship.
Prescriptive relationships	Mentors view their role as being an authority figure, with some responsibility for regulating the youth's behaviour. These mentors initiate their matches with goals for transforming the youth and begin their attempts to address difficulties in the youth's life early on in the relationship.

Source: Morrow, K.V. & M.B. Styles (1995) *Building relationships with youth in program settings.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures

20 A total of 115 mentors enrolled in the course, of whom 53 returned Pre-Program surveys, which represents a response rate of around 46%. This is perhaps due to the fact that the survey was emailed to mentors following the training, rather than completed at the training session itself. It should therefore be remembered that the statistics in this section therefore relate to this group only.

21 Morrow, K.V. & M.B. Styles (1995) *Building relationships with youth in program settings.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, p19.

22 Ibid.



A closer analysis of mentor comments and choice of words reveals that their intentions were more about supporting student's interests than prescribing or transforming them:

> *"I want to connect with a young person and **share** life experiences."*
>
> *"I wanted to volunteer because I would like to **share** what I can with a student about being in the workforce, and also I believe I can **relate** to the students at that age because I can still remember what it was like. I also enjoy **helping out** as part of the community."*
>
> *"I volunteered to be a mentor as I wanted to **contribute** to the community. I also hope that I can leverage and **share** my experiences and ideas to contribute to someone's success."*
>
> *(author's emphasis)*

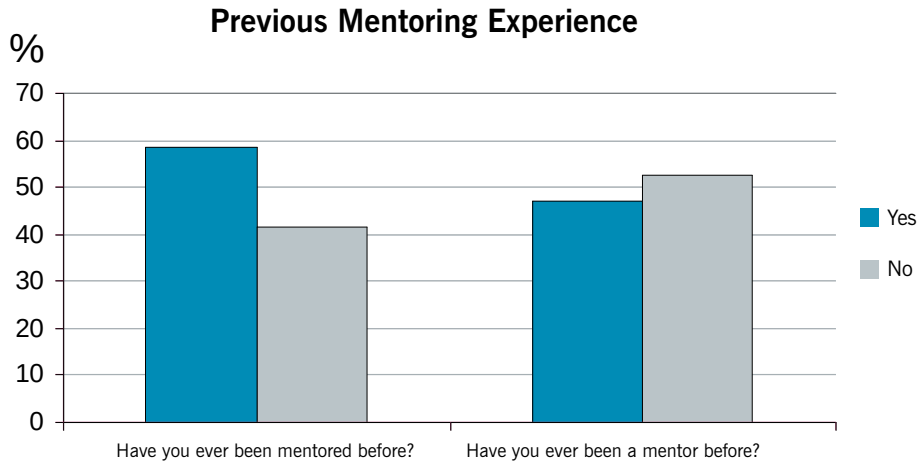
The vocabulary used by most mentors did not imply expectations of divisions of power / authority within the relationship. In fact, many mentors were explicit in their hopes that they too would be able to learn from the program, both in terms of better understanding the teenage generation and the experience of disadvantage:

> *"I am looking forward to a **new insight** into youth culture."*
>
> *"I would also like to get some **insight** to dealing with issues my children may face."*
>
> *"I think it will be fun and a valuable **learning experience** for me."*
>
> *"To **learn** how to work with teenagers."*
>
> *"To have an **understanding** of how life is for kids who live in disadvantaged areas."*
>
> *(author's emphasis)*

Previous mentoring experience

The majority of mentors (58.5%) had themselves been mentored before. Although for 60% of these people the mentoring had been informal (e.g. giving advice to a friend, family member or colleague on a casual basis as opposed to a more formal and focused program such as ***iTrack***), many explicitly referred to the value of this experience as a motivational factor for volunteering:

> *"I relish the role mentors play in my life and am happy to offer this to others."*
>
> *"I think I have a lot to offer and in the past have been a mentor in the workplace."*
>
> *"I have a mentor who has been beneficial to my career / personal life and I wanted to be able to share this experience."*
>
> *"I am currently mentoring a final year uni student in the workplace and I felt I had the skills and knowledge that would assist a young person."*



Slightly fewer (47.2%) had actually acted as a mentor to another, and of these, the majority had provided support on an informal basis (52%) and to another adult (80%) rather than youth. While this latter statistic helps clarify the interest in better understanding teenagers expressed earlier, it means that just 9.4% of all those who enrolled had prior experience of mentoring youth. ***iTrack*** therefore represented a new venture for most, further underlining the importance of the special ***iTrack*** training session for mentors prior to program commencement.

Meanwhile, those who had not had the experience of either being mentored (or mentoring another) were nevertheless able to imagine the difference a mentor could have made to them had the opportunity arisen:

> *"I feel that I could have done with some advice / support at that age; therefore I want to give someone a chance that I never had."*

> *"I really support the idea of providing support to people in making their school work transition decisions, and would have really benefited from such a program when I was in school, so I am glad to be in a position to contribute now!"*

> *"I thought that it would be interesting and possibly fun, whilst at the same time providing some real help to kids who otherwise may not have much adult guidance at an important stage of their life. While I do not regard myself as being disadvantaged in my upbringing, I certainly believe that I would have had some benefit from being able to discuss education and career options with an independent adult."*

STUDENTS [23]

As the literature points out, information regarding the expectations and motivations of youth who enter mentoring relationships is sparse.[24] To this end, the student Pre-program survey was designed to capture as much information as possible around enrolment. Previous pilots of ***iTrack*** have struggled to attract boys in particular, a trend that has been reflected across the mentoring sector as a whole. In general, the evidence suggests that adolescent males strive more for autonomy than girls, who place more importance on the development and maintenance of strong relationships and are therefore more attracted to mentoring.[25]

Although relatively little information exists to elucidate whether same-gender and cross-gender mentor relationships are more or less effective, there is an indication in the literature that same-gender models are associated with greater benefits for mentees, particularly boys.[26] While ***iTrack*** makes every effort to match genders, this is not always achievable in practice, and both students and mentors are informed of this possibility before agreeing to participate. Nevertheless, the split between males and females volunteering for the 2006 iteration was reflected pretty evenly across mentor and student populations, with

23 A total of 115 students enrolled in the course, of whom 110 returned Pre-Program surveys, which represents an excellent response rate of around 96%. It should be remembered that the statistics in this section therefore relate to this group only.

24 Keller, T. (2005) 'The stages and development of mentoring relationships'. In DuBois, D. & M. Karcher (eds.) *Handbook of Youth Mentoring.* Sage Publications: London, pp82-99.

25 Bogat, G. and B. Liang (2005) 'Gender in mentoring relationships'. In DuBois, D. & M. Karcher (eds.) *Handbook of Youth Mentoring.* Sage Publications: London, pp205-217.

26 Bogat, G. and B. Liang (2005) 'Gender in mentoring relationships'. In DuBois, D. & M. Karcher (eds.) *Handbook of Youth Mentoring.* Sage Publications: London, pp205-217.

males comprising 46.4% of the students volunteering. This represents a significant improvement on the struggle of previous pilots in attracting boys,[27] and is the result of the *iTrack* team working even more closely with the schools to proactively attract under-represented cohorts.

Post-school plans

93.4% of students who participated in *iTrack* 2006 reported an intention to leave school after finishing Year 12. This is encouraging in its display of commitment to education, but does not necessarily mean that they are equally certain with regard to their post-school plans. Previous research by The Smith Family (2006) has revealed that almost a third of students in Years 10, 11 and 12 had no vocational plans in place, and half of those that did were planning a level of education either too low or too high for their preferred job. Clearly, there is a strong argument for providing students with more information about how to get the job they would most like through initiatives such as *iTrack*, especially for those from disadvantaged sectors of the population.

Despite this need, the vast majority of the students (86.2%) had not been in a mentoring relationship before – a proportion consistent with the findings of previous *iTrack* evaluations. Of the minority who had been mentored before, around two-thirds (64.7%) reported this as being formal in nature.

Motivations for participating

The most important reason put forward by students for their enrolment in *iTrack* was to get career and training advice, which was reflected in their qualitative responses at a number of levels. Firstly, by those with no idea of what they wanted to do:

> *"[I am] currently unsure of my career in the future. I'm hoping to get ideas and advice on this."*
>
> *"Because I want to know what to do with my life."*
>
> *"Because I need some help about my future."*
>
> *"To get more information. Well, actually help with what I want to be or do after I leave school."*
>
> *"To get some advice on what it is like in the world of work."*

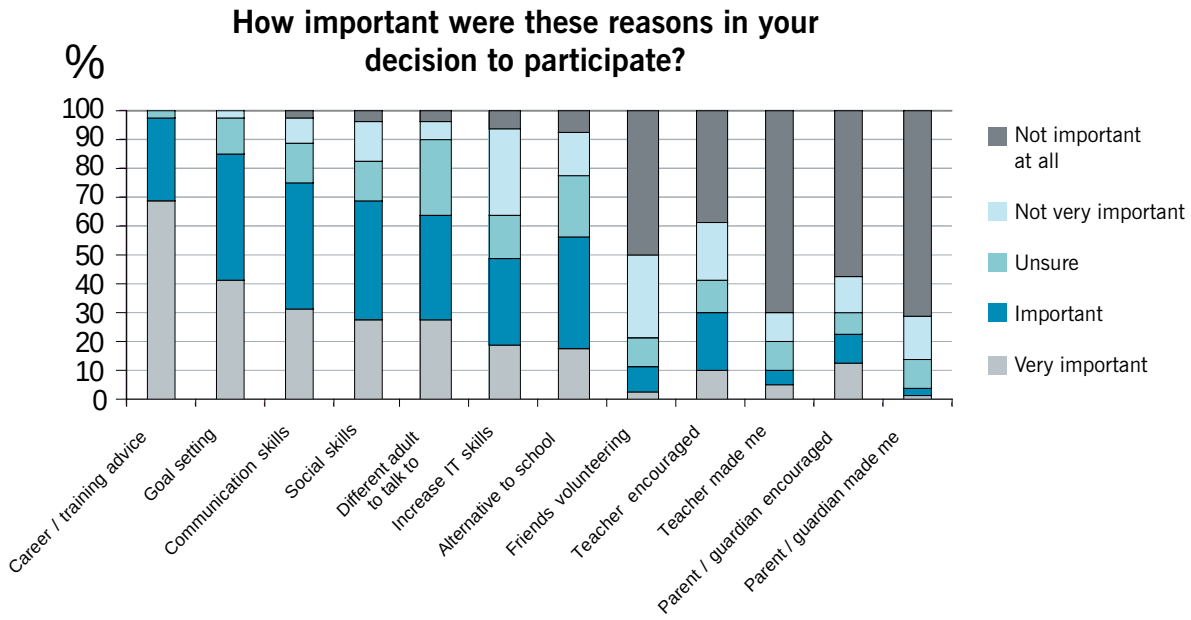
Secondly, by those who have a number of options in mind, but are confused as to which may be the best to pursue:

> *"To help me decide on my career path and to see if I've made the right decision."*
>
> *"A brilliant opportunity too good to pass up. It would give me more information on choices to make in the future."*
>
> *"Thought it would be a great opportunity to explore possible career paths, and to gain realistic information about the real world."*
>
> *"I believe that this is an opportunity to gain experience in a wide range of things and will enhance my knowledge in career options etc."*

Finally, by those with a particular job in mind, but needing guidance on how to prepare:

> *"To talk to a high up person who can give me advice on what I should do if I plan to become a dentist."*
>
> *"To learn more about business."*
>
> *"To get information about some jobs or get into TAFE, but I really want information about uni…"*

27 For example, the 2005 pilot of *iTrack* a gender split among students of 61.8% female and 38.2% male.



Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of the students were also attracted to ***iTrack*** because of the opportunity it presented to have an adult to talk to who was neither a parent nor a teacher. This is reinforced by the fact that over one-third (34.3%) of the students felt they had no other adults in their life who could help them with post-school plans and decisions. Research by The Smith Family (2002) into disadvantaged students in Year 11 found that 17% could not specify anyone with whom they would or had discussed attending university, college or further training – a proportion rising to 52% in relation to discussing leaving high school before finishing.[28] This has since been confirmed by further research (The Smith Family, 2005) indicating that despite the presence of parents and teachers, there is a strong need to provide students with more information about how to get the job they would like, as many in Years 10, 11 and 12 are struggling to understand the educational requirements of jobs.[29] The students in ***iTrack*** were very aware of the value of having the knowledge and experience of their mentor as a supplement to their parents and / or teachers:

> *"[I volunteered] because I do not have any close relations who have been through school and university so I saw **iTrack** as an opportunity to meet someone who had and get their advice, help etc."*

> *"I felt that it would be good for me to have an experienced person to talk to, seeing as there are not a lot of them in my close family."*

> *"I need help from someone who is experienced and who can hear me out."*

> *"I wanted help from someone who is experienced and know what they are doing as well as being older than me to help me decide what I wanted to be in the future..."*

This is a significant result for ***iTrack***, as it underscores the importance of the mentoring running *in addition to* any formal career guidance the students may already be receiving from guidance counsellors, for example.

As with the previous ***iTrack*** pilots, many students also looked upon the program as an important chance to develop their communication (75.2%) and social (69.4%) skills, attracted by the opportunity to meet new people:

> *"I thought it would be fun to meet someone new and get to know my mentor."*

> *"Because it is a good opportunity to meet new people and talk about career goals."*

> *"I was interested because I got told that we'll get to meet people."*

> *"It would be good getting to know them."*

> *"I thought it would be an exciting and fresh new experience."*

In contrast, only half of the students saw ***iTrack*** as an opportunity to increase their IT skills. This might seem strange given that computer and Internet technology

28 The Smith Family (2002) *Reducing the barriers to educational participation: An initial assessment of students' views of Learning for Life.* The Smith Family: Internal Report, March 2002.

29 The Smith Family (2005) *What do students know about work? Senior Secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work.* Report prepared for The Smith Family by The Australian Council for Educational Research, September 2005.

is at the heart of the program, but less so when taking into account the considerable exposure and confidence regarding computers that these students are likely to have already accumulated through their school and / or home environments.

Over half (56.5%) of students were attracted to ***iTrack*** because it offered them 'an alternative to normal school activities', with a further 21.3% unsure. It is worth referring to previous pilot evaluations at this point in order to understand why students might have responded in this way. For the 2004 pilot, this option was phrased in the survey as 'to get time off other school work' and only 12.5% rated this as being important in their decision to volunteer. This option was then rewritten for the 2005 pilot because of the negative connotations of the original phrasing, and the likelihood that students would feel either more 'obliged' not to report this as important, or suspicious as to the reasoning behind its inclusion – either way affecting their capacity to answer truthfully.[30] This re-phrasing to 'having an alternative to normal school activities' subsequently generated a significant shift in response, with 70.6% of students in the 2005 pilot selecting this as an important factor in their decision to volunteer. In the words of one mentor from the 2005 pilot:

> *"My student was basically doing **iTrack** to get out of lessons and showed little interest in doing a project or interacting beyond basic chit-chat. He probably wouldn't have joined if he had thought there would be some actual work involved."*

It is encouraging to see that no mentors from the 2006 program communicated this kind of frustration. However, interpreting the student response to this issue is difficult, and caution should be applied to the number of inferences that can be drawn from this and subsequent evaluations. On the one hand, it would appear that ***iTrack*** offers students a new and attractive platform for (or style of) learning that is perhaps less common in the schools participating. Equally, it could be that the students are attracted by the computer technology (an option not always available / appropriate within many classroom lessons), or by the opportunity to email during school hours, even if the communication is intended to be educational in focus. It could also be the case that students are simply looking for more variety in their day, or as one student from the 2006 cohort put it, *'Time off maths'*. Whatever the reason, it should be remembered that the majority of students truly appear to look upon ***iTrack*** as a personal development opportunity, rather than a distraction.

In terms of the influence other people have on students' decision to participate in ***iTrack***, only around one in every ten (11.9%) suggested that they had joined 'because my friends were volunteering', proving that peer pressure does not really play a part in attracting students to the program. However, over half (53.2%) did report that they had been encouraged by either a teacher or parent, which shows the important role these figures continue to play in their lives. Interestingly, of the 15.7% who suggested that they had been pushed into or 'selected' for the program by teachers or parents, there were many who eventually became more engaged than originally anticipated:

> *"Mrs Smith[31] selected us and then I said I would do it because it sounded interesting."*

> *"First I got selected then I wanted to do it because it is such a good opportunity."*

30 The anonymity of the survey is also likely to have had less impact in this context, given that they surveys were administered within a school setting where students are used to feeling 'scrutinised' or having their progress tracked on an individual basis.

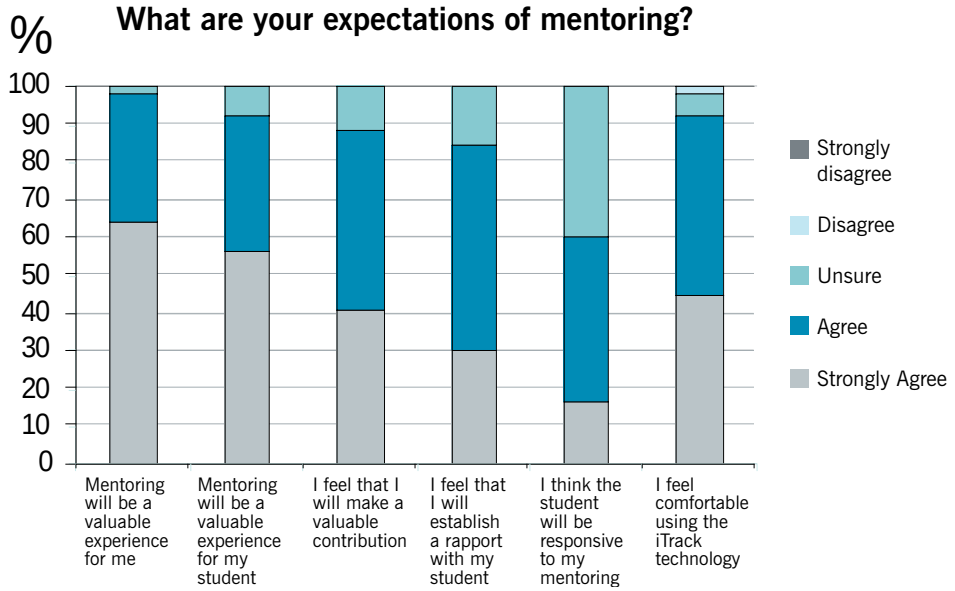
31 Name changed for reasons of confidentiality.

iTrack Expectations

This section also draws upon data collected in the Pre-program surveys, and relates mentor and students' expectations with regard to outcomes for themselves and their respective mentor / students.

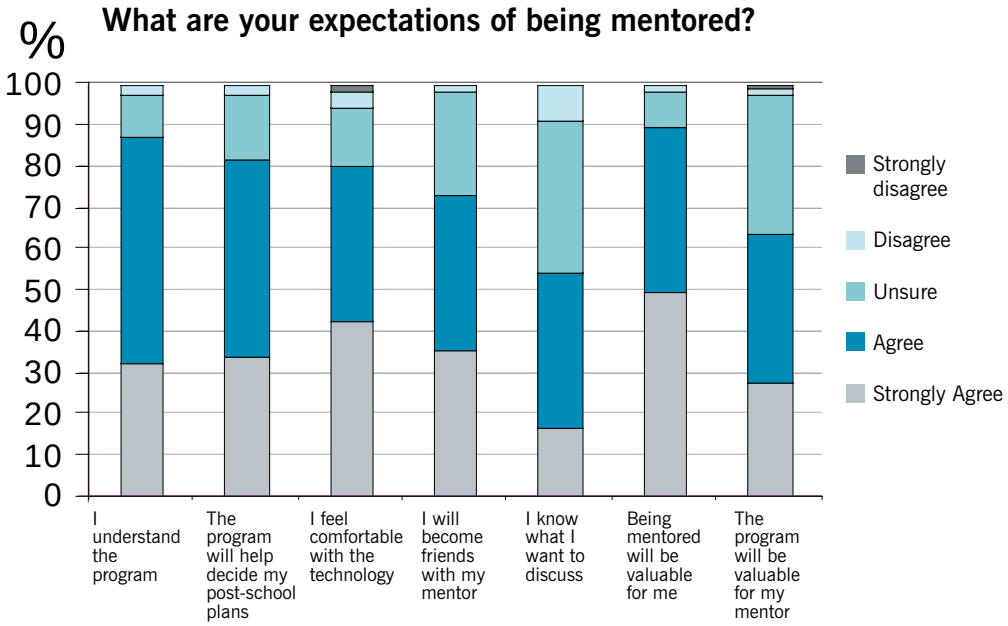
MENTORS

It is likely that the large number of mentors previously involved in mentoring influenced these data, with 98.1% confident that the program would be a valuable experience for them. 92.5% were also confident that it would be a valuable experience for their student, although they became gradually less certain when asked to consider whether they would make a valuable contribution (88.7%); establish a rapport with their student (84.9%); and whether their student would be responsive to their mentoring (60.4%). These initial suggestions of uncertainty are quite common in adult / youth mentoring relationships where age and lifestyle differences impact confidence levels, and are consistent with those recorded in previous ***iTrack*** evaluations.



STUDENTS

While the students were not quite as confident as the mentors regarding their expectations of the program, their aspirations were nevertheless extremely positive. Nine out of every ten (89.8%) were confident that the mentoring experience would be valuable for them, and 81.8% felt that the program would definitely help them decide what they wanted to do after leaving school. Around three-quarters (73.4%) also felt that they would become friends with their mentor. The real uncertainty lay in predicting the mentoring content or subject matter, as almost half (45.9%) were either unsure or disagreed with the statement "I know the types of things I want to discuss with my mentor". This is typical in light of the fact that most students at this stage were not yet able to refine their interests and formulate questions or discussion threads with their mentor to explore these. As the literature has shown, the process of educational mentoring does not usually begin with a clear list of problems to be solved, but rather works through a gradual discussion of the issues as and when they might emerge.[32]



32 DuBois, D.L. & M.J Karcher (eds.) *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*. Sage Publications: California. Various chapters.

Progress Indicators (Queensland)

Approximately halfway through the program, a second 'Progress' survey was distributed to participants in Queensland, this time to check on the progress and satisfaction of participants and to alert the facilitators to any problems that may have arisen. The reason for excluding New South Wales in this evaluation phase was because previous evaluations had judged that the resources expended in administrating this survey outweighed the importance of the data collected. ***iTrack*** staff were also conscious of the need to avoid 'survey fatigue' among participants. However, it was felt that as Queensland was the first location for the rollout of ***iTrack*** outside New South Wales, this extra level of data may be more useful in terms of tracking the potential impacts of the new context.

MENTORS (QLD)

The role of face-to-face contact

At this mid-way point, the evaluation found **no statistically significant differences** between those who had participated in face-to-face meetings with their students (the control group) and those who were mentoring purely online (the test group). This is positive in suggesting that the concerns in the mentoring literature that the quality of the mentor / student relationship may suffer do not appear to have been confirmed in ***iTrack***, at least at this stage of the program. Given that their experience did not significantly differ therefore, the following statistics therefore relate to the QLD mentors as a single cohort.

Although there were no statistically significant differences at this stage between mentors who had participated in face-to-face sessions with their students and those who hadn't, a few individual mentors from the control group did mention the value they had derived the face-to-face encounter, and the difficulties they sometimes encountered conducting online relationships:

> *"It's a great program, would benefit from more face-to-face encounters."*

> *"I find it hard to get my student to say very much about things, I can't read the body language of the student so don't know what they are thinking, or if long pauses after I type a question / comment are because they are preoccupied with other activities whilst engaging in online chat sessions or they are thinking about their response."*

However, other mentors have been surprised at how well they have been able to build a relationship online. As one observed, *"A sense of humour online is quite easy. Didn't expect this."*

The chart on the following page shows the feelings of the Queensland mentors across a number of key progress indicators. 88.9% agreed that they had developed a good rapport with their student (the remainder were unsure at this stage), as can be seen in these testimonies:

> *"It's great that we are able to talk about anything: family, friends, school and the future. She feels confident that she can talk to me and open up."*

> *"I feel it is going well. We are able to talk about a wide range of issues while still keeping the focus primarily on school and study."*

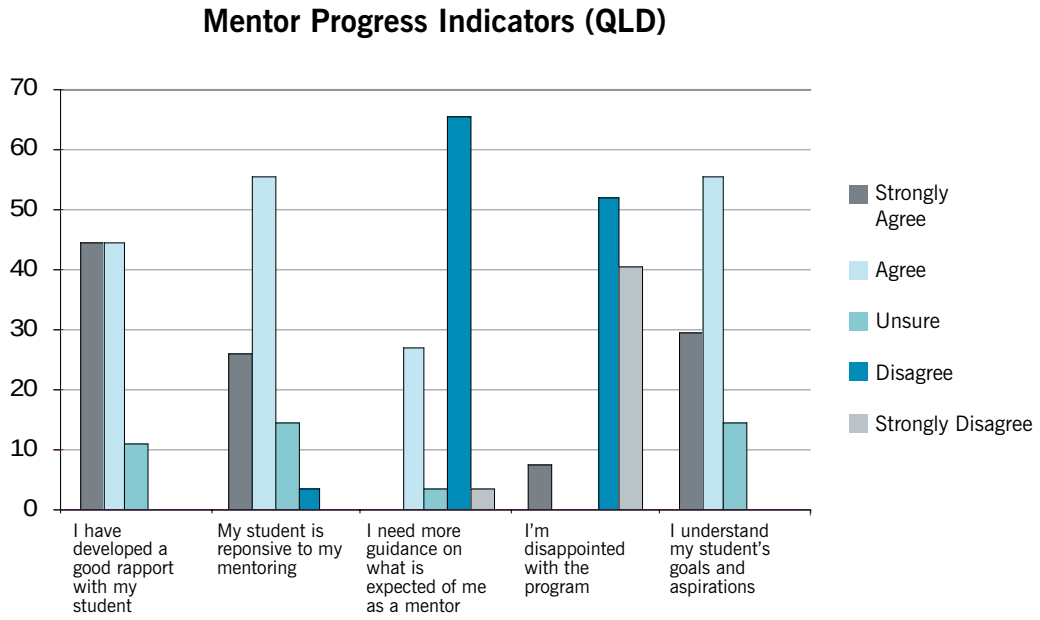
> *"It's improving every week."*

> *"I think the relationship is growing each week. I feel that we have made a connection and that we respect each other's point of view."*

This satisfaction was also apparent among mentors from the test group not involved in face-to-face sessions. In the words of one mentor,

> *"I have really enjoyed communicating with Sarah.[33] She is a vibrant enthusiastic and wonderful girl. I feel that we have developed a great friendship through this program. Sarah is really inspirational and I am learning a lot from her and I hope that the same has occurred for her also."*

33 Name changed for reasons for confidentiality.



Although much of the early interaction is around getting to one each other, 85.2% of the mentors also felt that they had by this stage developed a good understanding of their student's goals and aspirations:

> *"We haven't had time to do an activity on MentorPlace but we may do the travel one as Erica is interested in travelling. When I have sent her information about uni courses she has had a look at them and said they were useful."*

> *"In the last few weeks we have been trying to further develop Brian's strengths and addressed his weaknesses. We are now discussing his goals."* [34]

Finally, around 81.5% felt that their student was responsive to their mentoring – although for some mentors this gradually improved as they relaxed into their role and tried different techniques:

> *"At first I felt that I should lead the conversation and provide information and guidance, but I have let her take control and talk about what she wants to discuss and things have been progressing well."*

> *"I believe we are slowly developing an understanding of each other, helped more recently by the activities on MentorPlace. Hard to tell how she feels about the relationship given the medium of communication, I also sense a reservation to ask questions or seek information but rather she is waiting to be directed."*

The Progress survey specifically asked mentors what they had done to contribute to building their relationship with their student, so that these good practices and learnings could be shared more broadly to support participating mentors in the future. Although the tips were many and varied, there were a few consistent themes:

HONESTY AND TRUST

> *"I believe that honesty and being able to talk about your own personal experiences is what helps."*

> *"Listening to my student… building trust and providing honest opinions."*

BEING OPEN ABOUT YOURSELF

> *"I try to find common areas of interest to discuss not only asking about her but also offering information about myself to build trust and two-way communication."*

> *"I have sent a photo of myself and identified our common interests – netball."*

> *"Talked about our common interests, compared books that we have read, discussed favourite and least favourite subjects at school, taken an online personality test together and discussed results…"*

34 Names changed for reasons for confidentiality.

CONTINUITY

"I have followed up on offers of interest or ideas, referred back to past conversations and information she had shared about her life / plan / ideas."

"Tried to keep building on the conversations from week to week."

"I jot notes from each session to help me remember important points from previous sessions."

THINKING ONE STEP AHEAD

"I always try to be ready for the mentoring session half an hour before it starts, so I can be as present as possible in the session."

"Copying and pasting each week's dialogue into a Word file and marking up key points helps remind me of items I wish to continue discussions on from previous week."

"I have spent time doing research on the activities my student participates in and her interests as I am not familiar with drama, particularly the different types of performances. I also did some research on NIDA as one of her aspirations is to become an actress."

"Always being willing to do additional research."

AVOIDING A TEACHER-LIKE APPROACH

"You're never going to come up with a 'this is what you should do', and nor should you, but it's important for him to understand how his choices today can influence his opportunities tomorrow."

"While not talking directly about post-school issues, it is still easy to reflect on a student's strengths, ideas, personality and their interests, and how these may relate to post school decisions."

"Tried to have him decide the direction of the chat sessions and shown a genuine interest in what he is doing."

These themes, emerging from the ***iTrack*** 2006 mentors, are consistent with factors identified in the literature as contributing to satisfactory online mentoring relationships for both mentors and students. These included mentors being open about their background and interests, responding to affective as well as pragmatic issues, offering options for further investigation, using a conversational tone, and inviting other viewpoints and contributions.[35] As one mentor from ***iTrack*** 2006 summed up:

"I feel as a mentor that it's important to be flexible throughout the program as things do happen unexpectedly. It's also important to realise the age group you're dealing with and some of the issues they face – important to have expectations of them that are appropriate to their age group and level of development."

Fluctuations in confidence

According to the Progress surveys, around one in four mentors (25.9%) felt that they needed more guidance on what was expected of them as a mentor at this point, which is significantly more than the one in ten who reported similar feelings in the 2005 pilot. A number of factors may have contributed to this result, including:

- the inclusion of the non-face-to-face cohort within this group, who have not met their student in person and so are likely to be more unsure as to how they are progressing;
- the fact that fewer of the mentors from Queensland had been a mentor before (42.3%) when compared with those from the Sydney cohort (51.9%);
- the fact that more Sydney mentors (92.6%) agreed that they felt confident about their role as a mentor following the training than Queensland mentors (80.8%).

The comments from some mentors confirm this uncertainty, which in many cases seems to arise from those mentoring the stronger or more motivated students:

"At times I am unsure about what exactly my role is as my student seems to be very organised and a socially capable young person. I really admire my student and can identify so many strengths of character."

"Things are good but it seems we're about done – she's chosen her subjects, she's thinking about her options and the last few weeks we've been mainly just socialising – doesn't feel like we're accomplishing anything now."

"After talking about his career choices and thinking about how these could be studied in tertiary institutions, I'm not sure if I'm adding much value. My mentee was fairly set on his choices so I'm not sure how much I helped."

35 Miller, H. and M. Griffiths (2005) 'E-Mentoring', in DuBois, D.L. & M.J Karcher (eds.) *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*. Sage Publications: California, pp300-314.

Technological problems

Finally, some mentors reported having difficulties with the technology used in MentorPlace and *IGNITE!*, usually in terms of the slow responsiveness of the programs:

> *"I have found that the IGNITE! program problems need to be sorted out before another group of mentors goes through. It is frustrating and you can spend 20mins of the limited chat time just trying to get it to work every week. It's not just the slowness – patience gets you through that – it's when it freezes or doesn't display messages or sends them in the wrong order."*

> *"Getting the chat room to be a little more responsive would be good. It just feels clunky. Slow. Not sure if it's just the student on the other end or the system or a combination of both but the flow can sometimes be hard to establish."*

> *"It's not a normal chat session. Sometimes it can be hard to get a roll on because the responses can be slow."*

> *"Improve the chatting site. In the start there was too much problem with it freezing and being slow. The other thing is, it would be better if we can see that the other is typing at the moment, sometimes when one of us starts typing a long message, the other thinks they are being ignored."*

When ***iTrack*** was first piloted in 2003, participating schools were still using dial-up Internet connections, which significantly slowed the processing speed of the *IGNITE!* program. Since then, only schools who have broadband facilities participate in ***iTrack***, although the program still experiences considerable variations in speed due to the particular power of their hardware and connection quality. In light of these issues, The Smith Family is now investigating the possibility of having a new chat room built for the use of ***iTrack*** participants to address the technological issues raised above.

STUDENTS (QLD)

The Progress survey was important in that it marked the first opportunity to evaluate whether any differences had arisen between the student control group (which would have had at least one face-to-face meeting with their mentor by this stage) and the test group (who are conducting their mentoring purely online). Because the samples within each group who returned surveys were different sizes, various statistical calculations[36] were necessary to ensure that the results were first comparable, and secondly that any differences were statistically significant (in the sense of being sure the differences are real rather than arising through chance).

The role of face-to-face

At this stage, it emerged that, in alignment with their mentors, there were **no statistically significant differences between the control group and test (non-face-to-face) groups,** which is a positive result in that students without face-to-face contact did not appear to be disadvantaged in any way. With this in mind, the results presented in the table on the following page cover the mean (most common) responses to each statement from across the entire sample, with the relative proportions of control and test groups selecting this response provided for interest only. A selection of supporting comments from the students also appear in relation to various statements within the table.

From this table, we can tell the aspects of the relationship that students were at this stage most confident included feeling that their mentor was interested in what they had to say and in answering their questions; that they were happy about how the relationship was progressing; that they were comfortable with the way their mentor communicated to them; that their mentors were able to keep track of what they had discussed in previous sessions; and that they were having fun. This is reflected in their comments, which focused mostly around the positive relationships they had built with their mentors and their enjoyment of the program:

> *"My mentor is the best, we have a lot in common."*

> *"My mentor is excellent."*

> *"**iTrack** is really fun, I am learning a lot from it."*

> *"**iTrack** is a great program. It has been very helpful, interesting, fun."*

36 Firstly, the **statistical mean** in responses to each question was calculated for both control and test groups. Secondly, the normative value of 0.05 was divided by the number of variables (questions) across which the groups are being compared. The value of 0.05 is generally accepted as appropriate for this kind of comparable means analysis, and protects against the possibility of false positives contaminating the analysis (i.e. a positive result that appears merely by chance). This provided a value against which to measure *statistical significance (P).* Finally, a T-Test for Equality of Means was conducted for the variables across which the groups are being compared. Every value in the T-Test that was less than the value P is deemed **statistically significant** (i.e. not due to chance).

Statement	Mean response	% of Control Group who gave this response	% of Test Group who gave this response
My mentor is interested in what I have to say	Strongly Agree	62.5	71.0
I'm happy about how things are going with my mentor	Strongly Agree *"My mentor is great."*	52.2	68.8
I feel uncomfortable with my mentor	Disagree	37.5	9.4
My mentor and I seem to have common interests	Agree *"My mentor is the best, we have a lot in common."*	70.8	78.1
I feel like I am really learning from my mentor	Agree *"Talking to my mentor has helped me decide what I would like to do after I have got out of school, showing me courses which will lead me there as well. Its been a great experience for me."*	69.6	56.3
My mentor doesn't know me very well	Disagree	40.9	68.8
My mentor is interested in answering my questions	Strongly Agree *"It was good how my mentor sent me a booklet on undergraduate programs."*	54.2	65.6
I don't like the way my mentor talks to me	Strongly Disagree	75.0	87.1
Each time we meet, my mentor seems to have no idea what we were doing last time	Strongly Disagree	50.0	75.0
My mentor is almost always focused on me	Agree	70.8	65.6
I'm disappointed with how things are going with my mentor	Strongly Disagree *"This program is great. I recommend it to other students."*	45.8	81.3
I am having fun	Strongly Agree *"iTrack is really fun – I am learning a lot from it."*	45.8	81.3
The *IGNITE!* website is easy to use	Agree	50.0	46.9
The MentorPlace website is easy to use	Agree	50.0	56.3
The activities in MentorPlace are interesting and relevant	Agree	54.2	62.5

iTrack Outcomes and Achievements

Upon finishing the ***iTrack*** program, both mentors and students were asked to complete a final Post-Program survey tracking their experience of the program and any outcomes they felt they had achieved as a result of their participation. The survey also asked them to consider ways in which they thought the program could be improved.

This was the most important phase of data collection in terms of assessing the different experiences of the control (with face-to-face meetings) and test (non-face-to-face) groups. However, as previous ***iTrack*** evaluations (and typical data collection patterns across the community sector) have shown, the final tier of evaluation tends also to be the stage that typically generates the lowest response rates. 53 mentors returned Post-Program surveys (representing a 46% response rate), along with 76 students (representing a 66% response rate). The student response rate was a considerable improvement on the 2005 ***iTrack*** evaluation, (when just 37% returned surveys) and is the result of extra efforts on the part of The Smith Family's Learning for Life Workers to collect and chase up the surveys.

MENTORS

Final analysis shows that there were **no statistically significant differences** between the two groups of mentors at this stage of the program, which is a positive result in itself in that it shows the test mentors do not feel they have achieved any less simply by virtue of having no face-to-face contact with their students. To this end, the results discussed below relate to the combined datasets of test and control group mentors.

What do you think you have gained from participating in *iTrack*?

The first question on the Post-Program survey asked mentors to write in their own words what they felt they had gained from participating in ***iTrack***. The most common response was by far the generational insights they felt they had gained into teenage life and how the experiences of this new 'Generation Y' differed from their own.

> ***"I feel I have gained...***
>
> *...a fresh eye on how teenagers see life now."*
>
> *...a greater understanding of the pressures that teenagers are facing today."*
>
> *...appreciation of some of the issues young people face."*
>
> *...a better understanding of the trials of being a teenager and how external factors can impact heavily on school work and study."*
>
> *...an understanding that 15 year old kids aren't all rat-bags! :)"*
>
> ***...UNDERSTANDING***

The second most common response related to the value they felt they had derived personally from getting to know someone from a different background, and the fresh perspective on life that this brought them:

> ***"I feel I have gained...***
>
> *...some skills in developing a relationship with a child from a different background – it was interesting to have chats with someone who had such different interests."*
>
> *...great enjoyment in conversing with someone outside my usual range of contact."*
>
> *...a rewarding experience due to our cultural differences. It was nice to see how we shared many values even with our cultural and generational differences."*
>
> *...I found the mentoring program to be rewarding in that I had the opportunity to relate to a young person who is not a family member or a friend and be able to listen to her view of herself and of 'the world'.."*
>
> *...so much knowledge about mythology, Greek Gods, computer games... More importantly, I learned a lot about myself. This included looking at things through the eyes of my student, a very different perspective to my view of the world."*
>
> ***...RELATIONSHIPS***

Interestingly, many mentors felt they had gained important knowledge around the workings of the present-day education system in Australia, and of the greater variety of choices and pathways available today that they themselves may not have enjoyed:

> ***"I feel I have gained...***
>
> *...an understanding of a very different type of schooling – very agricultural. I also gained insight into the mind of a 13-year old who loves this environment and animals."*
>
> *...a better appreciation of the public school system, and issues facing students in less affluent areas of Sydney today."*

…an insight into teenagers' knowledge about TAFE and alternatives to uni."

…a better understanding of what schools are doing to assist students from all different backgrounds."

…KNOWLEDGE

Finally, mentors were also aware of how different aspects of their own skills (e.g. interpersonal, technological) had improved through the program, and of the sense of satisfaction they had built up from helping another:

"I feel I have gained…

…an improvement to my listening skills."

…technological skills, an enjoyable experience."

…just the joy and honour of being able to help someone who comes from the same background I did, i.e. poor financial background. Without sounding too corny, being able to give back to society is a real joy for me."

…personal satisfaction, patience, learning diplomacy."

…the sense of giving something back to community."

…the satisfaction of helping and providing guidance to a younger student."

…SKILLS AND SATISFACTION

What do you think your student gained from participating in *iTrack*?

The second question on the Post-Program survey then asked the mentors to consider the more difficult question, 'What do you think your student has gained from participating in ***iTrack***?'. Research has shown that no one type of pathway – whether apprenticeship, school-based vocational or general education – holds the keys to consistently successful transitional outcomes, and it is not the intention of ***iTrack*** or its mentors to promote any option more than any other without first taking into account the students' needs and capacities. Rather, the emphasis for mentors is on ensuring that pathways are accessible and clearly defined for students, arming them with the knowledge to negotiate them to their own benefit. Encouragingly, the most common response from mentors to this question reflected this fundamental objective of the program: an increase in the student's knowledge and ability to plan for work or further education after leaving school.

"I think my student gained…

…more direction, having started a program through her school which will allow her to follow her chosen career path."

…organisation skills, how to answer interview questions, how to write a letter for work experience."

…the idea that she doesn't have to decide right now what she wants to be doing in 10 years time, that what she studies in uni is not what she has to do for the rest of her life."

…knowledge with regard to uni, TAFE traineeships, and assistance in selecting subjects for Years 11 and 12."

…useful information for post-secondary plans that seemed to help with her senior subject selection."

…a better understanding of what working for an IT company means, and that it's OK to try different career choices first."

…DIRECTION

The second most common response related to the interpersonal (communication) skills that mentors felt they had helped build in their students, ranging from self-confidence to a new way of looking at their life:

"I think my student gained…

…more confidence to interact with adults that are not relatives or teachers."

…an understanding of how to examine her own skills, likes and interests and incorporate that into her career planning."

…an understanding of his potential and that he can really be someone one day if he puts his mind to it. Discipline and self-belief were the two biggest things I worked on in our time together."

…a greater sense of his own abilities and strengths."

…increased communication skills and the awareness of potential for opportunities outside the immediate situation."

…tools for effective public speaking. Ability to analyse situations and develop a range of solutions, rather than simply stick to the first answer (which may not always be the best)."

…how to make the best of a situation that may not have turned out the way they expected and how to always be on the look out for and seize opportunities from left field."

…CONFIDENCE

All of the skills mentioned by mentors here are those that research and their experience in the workplace have shown to be invaluable. As confirmed in The Smith Family's own research,[37] the range and diversity of pathways open to students today is so considerable that following a linear career trajectory is a non sequitur, with 'portfolio careers' now the accepted mantra. Yet the ability to make informed choices as to routes within this maze, and to access appropriate information, guidance and support remains relatively poor and inconsistent, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Too often, these kinds of services – whether classroom or counsellor based – are marginalised within schools, or function simply to steer higher achieving students into tertiary education and other lower achievers into 'subordinate' vocational training or poor quality jobs. A lack of institutionalised bridges between vocational training, apprenticeship and tertiary education further exacerbate this artificial binary division, reducing the likelihood of students on either path of fully understanding the flexibility or range of their options.

Simply having another person to talk to who can provide an alternative perspective to family members, teachers or career counsellors can be extremely important in helping students negotiate these complex pathways, and this was evident in a number of mentor responses:

"I think my student gained…

…an independent, no-strings-attached communication with an adult for practical tips on how to approach challenges and deal with unexpected life situations."

…the opportunity to interact with an adult who takes an interest in him and his activities – a surrogate 'uncle'."

…someone she can confide in and who will help her with her future choices as to living, working, family commitments, etc. and who will support her choices and help her achieve her goals in life. Basically, I hope she has gained a friend, even though it is a short-term arrangement."

…the view that there are others who you can approach to provide some mentoring."

…a sense that someone older and unknown can be supportive."

…A FRIEND

Finally, a handful of mentors expressed uncertainty around the outcomes they perceived for their student, which is to be expected given that students are often less able to articulate (or have / take the opportunity to communicate) the value of the experience outside of their own formal surveys. Moreover, the challenge of mentoring students who had already built up a strong idea of what they wanted to do was an influential factor:

"…not sure, just a fun experience I guess."

"…not sure, hard to tell."

"I think he enjoyed the experience, but not sure what he has taken out of it school-wise, given that he completed very few of the modules provided."

"I don't think my student gained much from the program. I don't feel like I engaged her most of the time and our connection was sometimes ok and sometimes not."

"I'm not too sure! My student was very sure about what she wants to do after school so she was not interested in any career / study / school conversations. I think she primarily gained a friend."

37 The Smith Family (2002) *School to adult life transitions through work and study: A select review of the literature.* Background Paper No.4, The Smith Family: Sydney.

Tracking outcome satisfactions

Many of the questions asked of mentors in the final survey were complementary to those in the Pre-Program and Progress surveys to enable comparison of mentor expectations and outcomes. The table below shows trends in satisfaction of the mentors over the duration of the program.

A number of broad conclusions may be drawn from the trends presented in this chart, including:

- The proportion of mentors who felt mentoring would be a valuable experience for them remained generally constant throughout the program, and was extremely high.
- The mentors' confidence in mentoring being a valuable experience for their student dropped significantly midway through the program (most likely because they were still getting to know their student at this point), but increased again at the end of the program (suggesting a better understanding of each other). Other factors influencing this fluctuation may be that students are often less able or willing to articulate (or have / take the opportunity to articulate) the value of the experience outside of a formal survey, and that the impact for students may predominantly be felt further down the line when they begin making the transition from school to work / further education.
- Mentors' initial expectations of making a valuable contribution within iTrack were confirmed by their feelings at the end of the program.
- Mentors' confidence in establishing a rapport with their student steadily increased as the program progressed (and their relationship deepened).
- The proportion of mentors who felt the student was / would be responsive to their mentoring increased from two-thirds prior to commencing the program to three-quarters upon completion. It peaked midway through the program (at 81.5%) which suggests that this was the period of greatest interaction.
- The initially high proportion of mentors who felt confident in their role before commencing iTrack dropped midway through the program, which is to be expected as mentors tackle the reality of getting to know and supporting their students. However, it is encouraging to note that these confidence levels rose again upon finishing, and less than one in ten (9.4%) felt that they needed more training throughout the program.
- The number of mentors who felt comfortable with MentorPlace and *IGNITE!* fell slightly over the course of the program, most likely due to the technological limitations pointed out by mentors earlier.
- Fewer mentors found the training and resource handbook useful as the program progressed, which is to be expected given that they would need to consult it less and less as they became more comfortable in their role.

Indicator	Pre-Program (53 respondents) % agreed	Progress Survey (27 respondents) % agreed	Post-Program[38] (53 respondents) % agreed
Mentoring will be / was a valuable experience for me	98.1	96.3	96.2
Mentoring will be / was a valuable experience for my student	92.5	74.1	80.8
I feel I will make a valuable contribution	88.7	n/a	84.9
I will establish / established a rapport with my student	84.9	88.9	96.2
My student will be / was responsive to my mentoring	60.4	81.5	77.4
I am / was confident in my role as a mentor	86.8	69.2	75.5
I am / was comfortable with the technology this program relies on (Ignite and MentorPlace)	92.5	n/a	83.0
The training and resource handbook is / was useful	94.3	n/a	77.4

38 As there were no statistically significant differences observed between the mentor control and test groups, the percentages in this column relate to both groups combined.

The role of face-to-face contact

While there were no statistically significant differences regarding post-program outcomes across the mentors as a whole, those in the control group were asked to comment on whether they thought the face-to-face meetings they had undertaken had been beneficial to the mentoring process. 84.6% agreed that contact in person had been helpful, mostly in terms of improving the strength and depth of their relationship:

"It was good to put a face to the name and interact in person, much easier to explain and talk about things face-to-face than via chat session, which seemed to go very quickly..."

"Being able to meet face-to-face helped break down the communication barriers. It added a human touch because it wasn't just some anonymous person on the other end of a computer. It also allowed me to learn a lot more about my mentee, as I'm sure he learnt more about me."

"It put the relationship into perspective, I had more understanding on how and why the student responded to some of my mentoring methods. For example, I treated the student as an adult via online chat without realising that there was the teenage side as well. Meeting with the student allow me to reset my expectations and adjust my method of communication."

Importantly, while most mentors felt face-to-face contact was an added bonus to the mentoring process, very few described it as being an essential part of its success. In fact, the general emphasis was on the ability of face-to-face meetings to enhance positive elements that were already in place, rather than introduce any new dynamics to the relationship:

"The face-to-face meetings seemed more important to the student than they did to me, however I know she really looked forward to face-to-face sessions."

"The meetings weren't necessary, however they were helpful to build the bond between us."

"Face-to-face reinforced the progress we were making..."

This emphasis was supported by the fact that comments from mentors in the test group (who did not participate in face-to-face meetings) did not reflect any sense of something having been lacking in their mentoring relationship as a result.

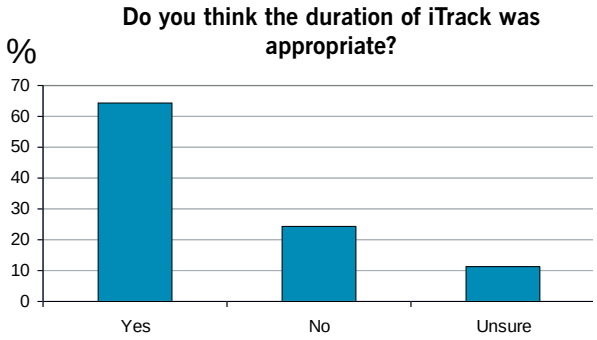
Program duration

Around two-thirds (64.2%) of the mentors felt that the duration of the ***iTrack*** program was appropriate at 19 weeks, mainly through acknowledging their own additional commitments and the capacity to encompass all aspects of a mentoring relationship within the timeframe:

"It would be hard to maintain an intensity in the program over a longer period of time. I found I was able to commit to the nineteen weeks without too much of a struggle on my work and personal life."

"Two terms I believe is sufficient to establish a good relationship with a willing student. Beyond that, it might be an issue of time for the mentor. There were several missed sessions due to conflicting school or work activities."

"I think the timing worked well, it allowed for a few weeks of getting to know each other, then a few weeks of mentoring / career type work and then a few weeks for finishing up."



"It was perfect for getting to know what the student was going through, to understand and listen, find a way to help the student give all the advice you can and then phase out of the relationship once you are done."

On the other hand, around one in four mentors (24.5%) were not happy with the 19-week timeframe, either because of circumstantial interruptions to their online sessions, or simply because they wanted more time to progress their relationships:

"I think it could have been longer. With school activities, holidays, my student being off sick two days and the delay in getting the police clearance, the actual number of days we chatted was only ten."

"We didn't get 100% time of the program for various reasons. This is always likely to occur so it would be better to allow a little longer than necessary to compensate for these factors."

"A bit too short , only really had enough time to build rapport / trust etc, the settle into it for a few weeks before having to wind things down again. Another month or two would be good."

"I think that it should be an extra four weeks just so that you're able to have more time to talk about subjects. Each sessions goes away too quick!"

"I felt that I was just beginning to develop a really good rapport with my mentee and we were starting to make good progress, and then it finished."

Of course, how mentors viewed the duration of the program was likely to be tied to their assessment of the quality of the relationship they had built up with their student and their broader sense of making a positive contribution. This subjectivity was evident across the mentors, and is highlighted in the contrasting responses received, for example, in relation to the duration of each online chat session (which were fixed at one hour):

"1 hour sessions sometimes proved too short especially when on occasions, students did not get online until 10-15 minutes past."

"My student and I both thought 1 hr was too long – 1/2 hr would have allowed my student to catch up on school work – also as my student didn't want to engage in a project, it was tough going sometimes trying to keep the conversation flowing."

"One hour is the right amount of time."

Continuing contact with the student

Mentors were asked as part of the Post-program survey whether they would, if they could, continue contact with their student after the project had finished. Although this option is not in reality particularly feasible or appropriate within the context of ***iTrack***, the question was asked to assess the quality of the mentoring relationships from a different perspective, i.e. whether the experience had motivated and / or inspired mentors enough to continue supporting their students of their own accord, or whether their commitment was limited to the boundaries of the program.

Just over half (58.0%) confirmed that they would like to continue contact with their student after ***iTrack***, with 28.0% unsure and a further 14.0% responding negatively. As expected, the reasons put forward for continuing contact reflected the interest among mentors in seeing how their students' futures panned out:

*"Perhaps consider the ability for Mentor / mentee to pursue post-program communication once or twice on mutual consent via the **iTrack** team. We had developed a very good rapport and it would have been nice to know how she developed and provide encouragement."*

"My student asked about contact after the program. I would like to have the chance to chat to my student from time to time via email and not on a scheduled regular chat session because I found that my student was often unwell or distracted by her friend that was sitting next to her and did not feel like chatting at the scheduled time."

"One thing that I'd like to see, and this cannot be achieved in the short term is a follow up – like the "seven up" documentary series – where you see how your student is going in future studies, work, life etc."

"I believe that if you have been able to connect well with your student, you may be a person that he / she may be prepared to confide in, at some time in the future. This connection should be controlled via the Smith Family, via e-mail. For example, if my student had an issue that he wanted to discuss with me in an advisory capacity about something he was unable to talk about at home or school, he could e-mail The Smith Family who could e-mail myself and contact each other via IGNITE!. No-one can assume that after 19 weeks we have covered all issues these students will face and we don't know what assistance they may look for in the future."

STUDENTS

Likes, Dislikes and Learnings

The first section of the student Post-program survey looked very simply at what students liked and disliked about the program, and asked them to consider what they think they may have learned. A representative selection of their comments can be found in the table below:

LIKES	DISLIKES	LEARNINGS
I got a new perspective on my hopes for the near and far future and felt like I made a good friend.	*Not being able to contact mentors after the program. Not even an email address!*	It gave me knowledge on how to go on to university and different choices I had.
Being able to talk to some one with a lot of experience about the workforce.	*The MentorPlace activities weren't very fun.*	Heaps. How I can change my future. What I should do to succeed.
It helped me decide on what I wanted to do in the future and ways I can achieve things.	*There were not enough activities in MentorPlace.*	I learnt about life after school, about how to get a job, applying, making decisions in life.
That you can ask your mentor anything and are constantly learning.	*I disliked how short the program was and limitations on the chat times.*	That adults really are cool when they aren't mean and talk to you like an equal.
iTrack has helped me achieve a lot. My mentor also taught me to believe in myself and that everything is possible only if I believe in myself.	*Only that we missed out on school work and had to catch up.*	I learnt that university was a better way to achieve my goal as well as working in the same field part time. Say you wanted to do hospitality, you would do university during the week then work in a hotel on days off. It helps with your further study.
I had an adult to talk to who was not part of my family.	*I found the session much too short as my mentor and I were always part way through something when it ended.*	I learnt new communication skills and how to look at every goal and option instead of the easy one.
I liked the way we were able to ask for a third party opinion on the decisions we made.	*I didn't like how you were unable to see if the other person was writing and there were no emoticons.*	More stuff about my career and how to communicate with others better.
Meeting other people, exploring their interests and learning more about careers and how that can help.	*That some of us did not get to see our mentors face-to-face.*	I learned to believe in myself and by doing so I can achieve anything that I want to do.

Post-school plans

Around 9 out of every 10 students (90.7%) participating in *iTrack* specified that they intended to leave school after finishing Year 12, which is comparable with the Pre-program survey data (93.4%) and the findings of *iTrack* evaluations from previous years. The majority (70.9%) also appeared committed to further study either full or part-time, while 29.1% were planning to work either full or part-time. Interestingly, just under one-quarter (24.3%) reported that this decision had changed as a result of participating in *iTrack*, but because this question was not asked in the Pre-program survey, it remains impossible to ascertain exactly who changed their plans, and how. The extent to which the *iTrack* program alone is responsible for instilling this desire for further education is similarly difficult to pinpoint, although 60.5% of the students agreed that the program had helped them decide whether to undertake further education or to look for work after finishing school.

Student skills development

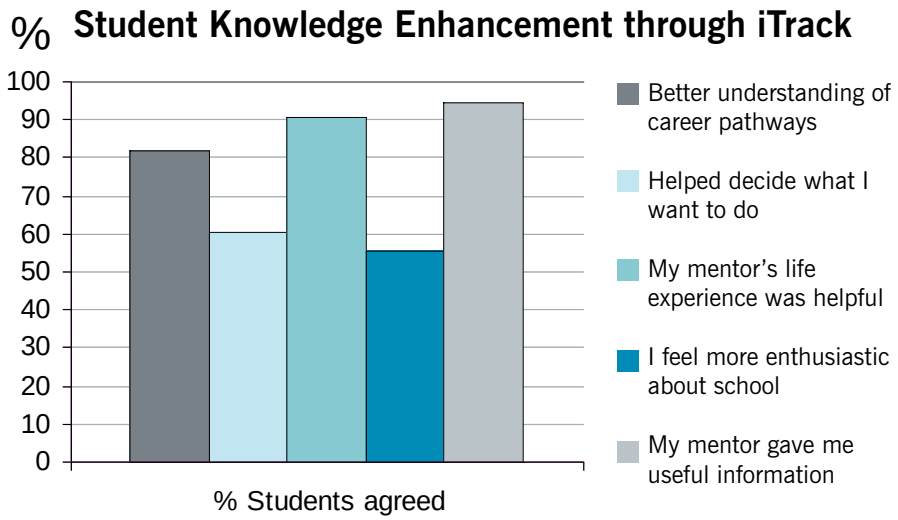
One of the most important findings in this survey – and for the *iTrack* program as a whole – is that more than 8 out of every 10 students in the program reported that they had gained a better understanding of possible career paths as a result of participating. The table below unpacks this in more detail by examining the specific skill-sets the students expressed interest in at the start of the program, and the proportion who felt they had benefited from / developed these particular skill-sets at the end of the program.

For example, the majority of students expressed a strong interest in getting career / training advice prior to commencing the program, and 86.8% reported benefiting from this at the end of the course. As the interest levels weaken (e.g. with most students unsure as to whether they were interested in improving their IT skills), so too does the proportion of students reporting benefiting from these skills (in this case, 43.4%). This is a positive finding for *iTrack*, as it shows the program (and its mentors) are successfully tailoring their range of potential skill contributions in accordance with student needs. In other words, *iTrack* operates on the whole as a successfully 'student-driven', rather than prescriptive, program.

Indicator	**Pre-Program** (110 respondents) *Mean level of interest*	**Post-Program** (76 respondents) *% benefited*
Getting career / training advice	Strongly Interested	86.8.
Getting help with goal setting	Interested	77.6
Developing communication skills	Interested.	74.7
Developing social skills	Interested	82.7
Having an adult to talk to who is not a parent or teacher	Interested.	81.6
Increasing IT skills	Unsure	43.4.
Having an alternative to normal school activities	Unsure	53.9

Knowledge enhancement

In addition to honing their personal skills, ***iTrack*** 2006 also enhanced students' knowledge around career pathways, as the chart below shows. More than 8 out of every 10 felt they had a better understanding of career pathways as a result of participating in the program, and 60.5% reported that the experience had helped them clarify what they wanted to undertake following school. Having the guidance and advice of their mentor was invaluable in this process, with 94.7% claiming their mentor had given them useful information and 90.8% confirming that they had found their mentor's life experience helpful. In addition, more than half of the students now felt more enthusiastic about doing well at school, which demonstrates the capacity of ***iTrack*** to motivate student achievement at the time of participating, as well as down the line.



Program duration

As with the mentors, students were asked to provide their opinion on whether they thought the 19-week duration of ***iTrack*** was adequate or too long. Again, this appeared to be a highly subjective issue, dependent on how motivated students were and how well their mentoring relationship had developed. For example, while 69.2% of students who participated in the 2005 ***iTrack*** iteration were unhappy with the 19 week duration, almost exactly the same proportion (70.3%) of those participating in ***iTrack*** 2006 agreed that it was an appropriate length from their perspective:

"I had enough time to talk to my mentor about a variety of things."

"It was long enough to get to know my mentor but not too long so it didn't drag out."

"It takes a while to know somebody and this period of time was perfect."

This accurately reflects the 64.2% of mentors who also felt the time frame was appropriate, and demonstrates how influential the mentor / student relationship is with regard to this issue. However, 14.9% of students did express dissatisfaction with the length of the program, for reasons that including wanting to learn more and feeling that their relationship with the mentor was just taking off:

"It didn't go for that long. We couldn't keep in contact with them after the mentor program finished."

"I felt I was really starting to get to know my mentor and goals we had set out for me were just starting to happen when it ended and I felt like I left her hanging."

"I think that it should have been longer because sometimes it takes a little while to open up to someone."

"I wish it went longer so I can talk about more things."

"The length was long enough over the semester but the sessions were too short."

The role of face-to-face contact

Students in the control group who took part in face-to-face meetings with their mentors were asked to consider whether they thought this had helped in the mentoring process, and 83.6% responded that it had. As in previous evaluations of ***iTrack***, the main reason put forward for this was the added comfort of seeing the face behind the online sessions:

"It was good to see who you were talking to."

"It helped by making everything feel more real."

"Well, it was real and you got to talk faster."

"It helped put a face to who I was talking to and to become more familiar."

"The communication felt more personal."

Given that the majority of students in the control group appeared to value the face-to-face opportunities for interaction, it might be expected that they would, as implied in the mentoring literature, demonstrate a greater enjoyment of the program and a better quality of relationship with their mentor than those in the test group (who did not have face-to-face meetings).

Sure enough, analysis of data collected from the student Post-program survey found **a number of statistically significant differences** between the control (face-to-face) and test (non face-to-face) groups across various indicators. However, the findings actually suggested that in assessing the quality of their mentoring relationship, those students in the test group were generally more positive than those who had participated in face-to-face meetings. In short, the data revealed that:

- Test group students were **more likely to say they had become friends with their mentor** than those having face-to-face meetings;
- Test group students felt **more comfortable communicating with their mentor** than those having face-to-face meetings.
- Test group students were **more likely to feel that being mentored had been a valuable experience for them** than those having face-to-face meetings.
- Test group students **enjoyed participating in the program more** than those having face-to-face meetings.

There are a number of possible reasons for this, many of which are discussed in the Literature Review in Appendix B and summarised below. They include the relative confidentiality and anonymity of online communication, the reduced likelihood of prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes tainting the mentoring relationship, and the reluctance among some students to commit the time or effort to attend face-to-face meetings.

1. Confidentiality and Anonymity

In small rural and remote towns, a negative perception and image of youth is relatively common, being perceived as lazy, disrespectful, loud, obnoxious and generally as 'problems, as having problems and as causing problems'. These stereotypes are maintained in the media, and in a small town, an individual's attitude, behaviour or misfortune can be exaggerated and generalised to the whole youth community. The relative anonymity that distance mentoring can afford may be a benefit in this light, avoiding 'everyone knowing everyone else's business'.[39]

The Internet might be particularly appealing to youth who are too shy or withdrawn to reach out to the people around them. Youth who are less socially at ease, and have grown up with computers and the Internet, might feel more comfortable obtaining emotional support from the privacy of their computer terminal than in face-to-face interactions.[40] An evaluation of the *Digital Heroes Campaign* in the US revealed many youth actually preferred the semi-anonymous nature of e-mail, particularly in the beginning stages of the relationship.[41]

More general research has also shown that the Internet has a disinhibiting effect on users, leading to increased levels of honesty and self-disclosure. Furthermore, because the Internet is not a face-to-face environment, it is perceived by many users to be anonymous and non-threatening. It may therefore be appealing to 'socially unskilled' individuals who may not otherwise seek help.[42]

It is likely that at least some of the test group students participating in ***iTrack*** 2006 preferred the relative anonymity of purely online interaction, particularly with regard to the discussion of personal issues. As one student put it, *"I feel more comfortable talking to someone I will never meet."*

2. Less prejudicial attitudes among mentors

E-mentoring results in the attenuation of status differences by concealing social cues that otherwise hinder communication between higher and lower status individuals.[43] This may be important in overcoming prejudices associated with accents, class background etc. Because of the physical separation of the participants, the process of matching mentees with suitable mentors is less concerned with personal characteristics than might be expected in a more traditional mentoring scheme.[44]

39 Kenyon, P et al (2001) Creating better educational and employment opportunities for rural young people. A Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, 2001.

40 Scealy, M., Phillips, J., & Stevenson, R. (2003). Shyness and anxiety as predictors of patterns of Internet usage. *Cyberpsychology & Behaviour,* 5, 507-5156

41 Saito, R. N. & Sipe, C. L. (2003). E-mentoring: The digital heroes campaign Year Two Evaluation Results. Unpublished report prepared for MENTOR/ National Mentoring Partnership and AOL Time Warner Foundation.

42 Miller, H. and M. Griffiths (2005) 'E-Mentoring', in DuBois, D.L. & M.J Karcher (eds.) Handbook of Youth Mentoring. Sage Publications: California, pp300-314.

43 Sproull, L. and S.B. Kiesler (1992) Connections: New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Another study refers to these features inhibiting interaction (such as age, accent, income and status) as 'gating features', and suggest that purely online relationships may be formed more easily than those with face-to-face contact, precisely because of the lack of these gating features.[45]

With regard to ***iTrack*** 2006, it may have been these 'gating features' that led to some of those who did participate in face-to-face meetings failing to perceive any additional benefit, or worse, concluding that the meeting had actually made them feel more uncomfortable. As these students put it:

> *"It was a bit uncomfortable..."*
>
> *"We didn't communicate much [at the face-to-face meeting]."*
>
> *"It didn't change anything."*
>
> *"The mentor meetings should not be so formal. It was hard to relax and have a good time getting to know my mentor."*

3. Motivational barriers

Students may also be reluctant to commit to face-to-face meetings. For example, some students involved in the 2005 ***iTrack*** pilot reported that in their eyes, keeping up to date with their classes was more of a priority than attending face-to-face meetings and missing school. School facilitators on the 2005 program also referred to the strict 'excursion' guidelines now enforced by the Department of Education that made coordinating and organising venues and dates for face-to-face meetings frequently challenging. In their words, "The bureaucracy that has now developed even at the school level means approvals and variations to routines must go through a process." [46]

Lifting this constraint also enables mentors and mentees to connect with a much wider array of volunteers, freeing up mentoring coordinators to match mentors and mentees who share interests (a key factor in building relationships) as opposed to making matches by reason of physical proximity. Programs largely based on e-mail do make it possible to involve a wider array of mentors (e.g., corporate executives, busy parents, adults who travel a lot or are physically disabled) and mentees (incarcerated, in residential treatment facilities, rural) who would not otherwise participate.[47]

On-line communication also removes some time constraints, enabling mentees and mentors to connect more spontaneously. A teenager's willingness to disclose is unpredictable – they may have very little to say during a face-to-face meeting with their mentor (who just travelled across town to meet with them) yet feel compelled to make important disclosures late at night over e-mail.[48] Although the ***iTrack*** online sessions occur during the day, the central notion of this point regarding the unpredictability of student disclosure is still valid.

Finally, it is evident that students today enjoy much greater access to and familiarity with forms of technological communication, with an increasing proportion utilising email, text messaging and online chat rooms to initiate and maintain friendships / relationships.

In conclusion, the finding that test group students without face-to-face meetings demonstrate greater overall enjoyment of the program, and greater satisfaction across various indicators around the quality of their mentoring relationship, is significantly positive for ***iTrack***. It reveals that students without face-to-face meetings do not appear to be disadvantaged in terms of their satisfaction with their mentoring relationship, and can in many instances turn out happier than their control group counterparts. This provides strong support for the future expansion of the ***iTrack*** program across Australia as a purely online initiative, capable of creating positive and productive relationships between rural and remote students and urban mentors working in their desired field.

44 Sturgess, P. and M. Kennedy (2004) DE Mentor: The challenge of supporting distance learners. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development,* Vol.1 No.2, 2004.

45 McKenna, K.Y.A, A.S. Green & M.E.J. Gleason (2002) Relationship formation on the Internet: What's the big attraction? Journal of Social Issues, 58(1), 9-31.

46 2005 ***iTrack*** evaluation report, The Smith Family.

47 NMP (2003) 'On-line mentoring: The promise and pitfalls of an emerging approach'. National Mentoring Partnership, November 2003. Accessed on 28 December 2005. www.mentoring.org/program_staff/research_corner/on-line_mentoring.php?pid=all

48 Ibid.

School Facilitator feedback

The 2006 ***iTrack*** pilot distributed special surveys to each of the Facilitators working in the schools where the program was operating. The results were useful both in terms of picking up on some of the practical challenges of running the program within different school environments, and also in gauging a different perspective on the students' progress and enjoyment of the program. Of the ten schools that participated in the ***iTrack*** program, seven returned Facilitator surveys, and their comments are summarised in the table below.

State	**NEW SOUTH WALES**			**QUEENSLAND**			
School	**Wiley Park**	**Alexandria Park**	**Chester Hill**	**Chancellor State**	**Morayfield**	**Alexandra Hills**	**Southport**
The purpose and goals of *iTrack* were clear	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
The roles and responsibilities of the school were clearly defined	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
The Year level targeted for recruiting students was appropriate	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree
***iTrack* should be voluntary for students**	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
School term cycle most appropriate for running *iTrack*	Term 2 and 3 *the time for making subject selections*	Term 2 and 3 *Term 4 is too hectic with exams*	Term 2 and 3	Term 2 and 3 *Term 4 is too busy*	Term 2 and 3 *to allow preparation time to choose the students*	Term 2 and 3 *students are getting ready for subject selection*	Term 2 and 3 *after students settle in Term 1, they can use mentor benefits in Term 4*
The timing of *iTrack* activities was appropriate to the term curricula	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree
19 weeks was a good duration	**No** – too long, 12 weeks would be more appropriate	**Yes** – it allows for absences and time for students and mentors to get to know each other	**Yes** – plenty of time to build relationships	**Yes** – enough time for students to establish relationships but not get bored	**Yes** – enables the students to explore their options	**No** – too long, students were running out of things to discuss	**No** – our program started late but seemed sufficient

Continued >>

State	NEW SOUTH WALES			QUEENSLAND			
School	**Wiley Park**	**Alexandria Park**	**Chester Hill**	**Chancellor State**	**Morayfield**	**Alexandra Hills**	**Southport**
It was easy and convenient to coordinate face-to-face meetings	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree – our school calendar is very crowded	n/a	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	n/a
It was easy and convenient to facilitate the on-line chat sessions	Strongly agree	Disagree – computer problems and supervision was only possible with assistance of The Smith Family Coordinator	Strongly disagree – we had big technology problems which caused enormous hassles	Agree – ensuring rooms and computer availability was sometimes challenging	Strongly agree – I had great help	Agree – although there were problems getting some mentors on-line	Agree
What I LIKED about *iTrack*	Connection with an outside agency and the support from the ***iTrack*** Coordinator	Well organised, excellent program gives kids lots of support. Interesting, with kid-friendly delivery.	Well organised, excellent program gives kids lots of support. Interesting, with kid-friendly delivery.	Seeing the students committed due to the relevance of the program. The technology was great for students.	I liked that students gained experience communicating with an adult outside of school, which broadened their outlook	The concept and idea behind ***iTrack*** is great and I believe it can offer some good directions to our students	The students thoroughly enjoyed the program and really benefited from it
What I DISLIKED about *iTrack*	Would like to have had more students participating to develop a greater sense of cohesion as a group	When the computers wouldn't cooperate and the students and mentors lost patience	The only negatives were on our side, not ***iTrack***'s. We didn't target the right kinds of kids and the one hour time frame didn't fit our school structure	The promise of mentors for all kids and then delays due to the inability to secure Brisbane mentors	Nothing, it is a brilliant program with a lot of thought and time gone into the planning of it	I would have liked to have some of the objectives and outcomes more explicitly outlined with some sample dialogue provided to mentors to assist in chat sessions with the students	Although I understand the reasons, it was disappointing that the contact with mentor stopped – some of the students wanted to share their completion of their goals with their mentors

iTrack would not be possible without the support and contribution of the participating schools, and particularly of the school facilitators who supervise and provide guidance to students in setting up and maintaining their online relationships. Building close relationships with school staff and students has always been part of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* strategy and suite of programs, and the shared commitment to student welfare and educational advancement is a powerful force behind this partnership.

With this in mind, a few points are worthy of mention in relation to the school facilitator feedback summarised in the table:

- All Facilitators that participated understood the goals and objectives of ***iTrack*** and their roles and responsibilities.
- All Facilitators felt that ***iTrack*** was appropriately targeted to students and were unanimous in that participation should be voluntary.

- All Facilitators selected Terms 2 and 3 as being the most appropriate for ***iTrack***, which supports the move from Terms 3 and 4 in the 2005 ***iTrack*** pilot.

- As with the mentors and students themselves, the Facilitators were divided as to whether 19 weeks was the best timeframe for ***iTrack***, although the majority believed it was.

- Those schools that were required to organise face-to-face meetings generally found this to be easy and convenient to organise.

- A number of Facilitators expressed frustration at technological problems during chat sessions, and valued any extra support they received in resolving these issues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 2006 rollout of ***iTrack*** has, according to the data collected through this evaluation, been a great success. The key objectives of providing students with more information and guidance on choosing and planning for appropriate pathways from school into work or further education have been fulfilled, with 94.7% of students confirming that they had received useful information from their mentor. In their own words:

"Thanks for helping us do this special program – keep it up!"

"It was really good and I wish we could do it next year."

*"I would like to continue **iTrack** through Year 11 and 12 so that I can turn to someone to help me make decisions..."*

"I loved the program and I think more students should be allowed to be involved."

"This was really awesome. Thanks heaps to our mentors and The Smith Family program."

"Keep up the great work making this program possible. I love everything. Thank you!"

In turn, 96.2% of mentors concluded that the program had been a valuable experience for them, and provided many supportive comments including:

"I felt fortunate to be part of this project and will certainly be promoting it with AMP for 2007."

"I strongly enjoyed the experience and would like to be invited to continue next year."

"It was very well organised and a fun program to be part of. I really enjoyed getting to know my student and I felt a little sad saying goodbye... I felt so proud of her when I found out she got a part time job and I would love to hear about her other achievements. I would definitely participate again."

"I would like to thank The Smith Family for giving me the opportunity to participate in the program. At all times The Smith Family were supportive and I never felt out of my depth."

"A job very well done. Thanks for looking after me in this my first mentoring relationship."

"I think it's a great program and if you need me, see you in 2007!"

In conclusion, the findings discussed in this report consolidate and advance those of previous ***iTrack*** evaluations, and are strongly supportive of the need for The Smith Family and its corporate partners to continue expanding the program to support more and more students nationwide. With this in mind, the mentors, students and School Facilitators were also asked to suggest ways in which they thought the program could be improved for its next rollout in 2007. The results are summarised in the table of recommendations on the following page.

Table of Recommendations for future *iTrack* iterations

PROGRAM PHASE		
Preparation	***Implementation***	***Evaluation***
Mentor Training Provide more specific info on why the student is part of the program, i.e. are there problems at home? Financial disadvantage? What does the student want from the program? Does the student have a good idea of the industry they want to work in but uncertain of the roles available in this industry? This will avoid some students wondering if maybe someone else who was less certain of what they wanted to do could have gotten more benefit from the program. Perhaps provide some information for older mentors on the current education systems in their student's state, to allow them to provide accurate information. **Mentor Police checks** Need to get these in as early as possible to avoid delays in commencing the program and disappointing students and mentors. **Student Motivation** Perhaps make clear that only students who are interested in career guidance need apply, rather than those looking to simply make a friend as this can confuse the mentor in terms of what role they play.	**Technology.** Need to make MentorPlace and *IGNITE!* more stable and faster so that the on-line chat sessions can run more smoothly. Need to introduce a feature within *IGNITE!* to allow mentor / student to know the other is in the process of writing a response. Possibly introduce symbols or pictures to diversify forms of interaction between mentor and student. Consider developing on-line training resources for mentors to practice and hone their skills before and during the program. **Chat session timing** Perhaps set up alternative weekly session times to be mutually agreed by mentors and students so that if either miss a session due to sickness on one day they can make it up later in the week. If the chat room sessions are monitored, perhaps keep them open after work/school to allow more flexibility in when students and mentors can chat. **Non-face-to-face groups** Ensure that swapping of photographs between mentor and students occurs in the first week, rather than halfway through the course.	**Student follow-up** There could be some kind of contact with the students in the years following the program to enable mentors to trace their progress and provide further support or references. Perhaps consider the possibility of matching the same mentor / student pair together the following year, or at least facilitating the same students to participate in successive years should space allow for this. **Evaluation surveys** Ensure that the Pre-program, Progress and Post-program surveys are more tightly consistent with regard to language used and the information that is needed (e.g. asking students their intended balance of work/study in the Pre-program survey to enable comparison at with the Post-program survey). Also, consider whether the Progress surveys are necessary/worthwhile in light of the information they collect and the level of effort required.

Appendix A

Overview of IBM MentorPlace

MentorPlace is a volunteer program that brings adult professionals and students together in online relationships focused on academics. Employee-volunteers are charged with providing students with academic assistance and career counselling, while letting them know that adults do care about their issues and concerns.

The program was designed and piloted by the IBM Corporation as part of its global community relations program. Ed Reach, a non-profit organization committed to expanding quality online mentoring programs around the world, has developed the unique software that is being used by MentorPlace programs around the world. This work is part of their greater work as the leading provider of school-safe email and collaborative technology.

Above all else, MentorPlace depends upon people: committed employee volunteers, teachers and students.

Participants are required to:

- Have access to technology;
- Participate in comprehensive program and technology training;
- Communicate online at least once a week with each other;
- Meet each other in person (where possible) at a structured orientation to kick-off the program and at an end-of-the-school year celebration;
- Complete evaluation forms about the value of their experience in the program; and
- Adhere to all safety and security rules and regulations of the program.

For more information, visit www.mentorplace.org

Appendix B

The Role of face-to-face contact in online mentoring

A Smith Family Literature Review

Overview

Face-to-face mentoring, or 'traditional' mentoring as it is often referred to in the literature, has been around in many shapes and forms for many years. E-mentoring,[49] in contrast, is relatively new on the scene and has emerged only as the Internet and computer technology has become more widely available across society. It has been usefully defined most comprehensively as:

> *A relationship that is established between a more senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé) primarily using electronic communications, and that is intended to grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor. (Single and Muller, 2001:108)*

Despite greater technological facilitation and an expanding array of venues (e.g. chat rooms), e-mentoring has a long way to go before it reaches the profile and stature of traditional face-to-face models. The assumption that it remains inferior to its predecessor due to the lack of 'real' (face-to-face) interaction is widespread across all mentoring sectors, and has discouraged many from exploring the model in any comprehensive or longitudinal manner. As one observer points out:

> *Much of the discussion around online mentoring has been speculative or based on research that involves very small samples and cross-sectional data. Few peer-review articles have been published on the topic, and most of the information that is available through websites is limited to program descriptions. When success is measured, it is often in terms of the number of new matches that have been made, as opposed to their intensity, duration or effects on youth outcomes. Despite this dearth of information, people tend to hold strong opinions about online mentoring, debating whether the Internet promotes or undercuts social connections and whether online relationships can ever be as influential as those sustained through face-to-face interaction. (NMP, 2003)*

Unlike traditional mentoring, which has been heavily researched from numerous perspectives and within a variety of sectors, there remains little empirical information in the e-mentoring literature about moderators of change, that is, about factors that affect outcomes differently across populations or practices (Miller and Griffiths, 2005). This dearth of evidence has in turn led most experts to broadly suggest that exclusively online relationships are preferable only when face-to-face connections are unavailable, unfeasible or inappropriate (NMP, 2003). Due to the lack of sophistication in the e-mentoring literature at present, it remains unclear whether not having face-to-face meetings necessarily impacts negatively on e-mentoring outcomes, or if this potential deficit could be made up in other ways.

The advantages of face-to-face contact

The literature is full of examples of the benefits of face-to-face mentoring, although it must be noted that a large number of these appear to derive from assumptions rather than empirical evidence. They include:

1. A 'closer, more communicative' relationship

It has been pointed out that e-mentoring usually carries a very restricted amount of information by virtue of the 'impersonal' and 'emotionally spare' communication platform of the Internet, which does not permit for voice tone or nonverbal forms of communication (e.g., smiles, pauses, body language). It is suggested that these visual and aural subtleties are absolutely necessary to support close relationships, and that wholly online mentoring is therefore less satisfactory, less expressive and less conducive to establishing trust and rapport than traditional models (Bos et al., 2002).

Indeed, as Ensher & Murphy (1997) point out, there is considerable potential for youth e-mentoring in particular to suffer complications associated with miscommunication, misinterpreting humour or sarcasm or misreading the tone of an email as negative. The lack of personal contact may also lower a youth or a mentor's inhibitions, leading them to say angry or hurtful things that they would never say in person. Furthermore, while a busy adult might think nothing of postponing a response for a few days, mentees might see such delays as signs of anger or rejection, further confusing the relationship. It is because of problems such as these that

49 E-mentoring is used in this review to refer to mentoring that is conducted at least partly by means of electronic communication, such as through email and chat-rooms. There are many interchangeable terms in the literature synonymous with e-mentoring, such as 'telementoring', 'virtual mentoring' or 'on-line mentoring'.

online relationships are seen to progress at a slower rate than face-to-face (NMP, 2003).

Of course, the impact these potential miscommunications have will differ depending on the nature and objective of the mentoring being undertaken. From the perspective of *iTrack*, which seeks to enhance students' school-to-work transition through appropriate career guidance rather than emotional counselling, the likelihood of these occurring and the severity of their impact is less.

2. Improved stakeholder understanding / engagement

As shown in previous *iTrack* evaluations, the experience of mentoring does not always meet the expectation of the mentor, with dissatisfaction particularly common where the contact between mentor and mentee is relatively limited. To this end, face-to-face meetings may be more productive in the sense of really understanding the support they are providing, thus elevating the sense of commitment between both involved (APESMA, 2002).

The literature also notes that mentoring relationships that lack face-to-face contact may 'fall to the bottom of the pile' in terms of how mentors prioritise their time, while email provides almost too convenient a vehicle for a mentee to simply attach documents and seek advice on them from the mentor. This may actually relate to a basic misunderstanding of the purpose behind the relationship however, and may be resolved without introducing face-to-face contact if both parties are encouraged to undertake proactive and collaborative activity (APESMA, 2002).

The advantages of purely online contact

The literature is not forthcoming with examples of successful mentoring relationships that are maintained purely online. This is not to say that quality relationships cannot originate through this platform – in fact, 12% of US newlyweds last year met online[50] – but that within the framework of a formal mentoring program, the outcomes valued are of a different nature and are reported in more of a piecemeal fashion:

1. Confidentiality and Anonymity

In small rural and remote towns, a negative perception and image of youth is relatively common, being perceived as lazy, disrespectful, loud, obnoxious and generally as 'problems, as having problems and as causing problems'. These stereotypes are maintained in the media, and in a small town, an individual's attitude, behaviour or misfortune can be exaggerated and generalised to the whole youth community. The relative anonymity that distance mentoring can afford may be a benefit in this light, avoiding 'everyone knowing everyone else's business' (Kenyon et al, 2001).

The Internet might be particularly appealing to youth who are too shy or withdrawn to reach out to the people around them. Youth who are less socially at ease, and have grown up with computers and the Internet, might feel more comfortable obtaining emotional support from the privacy of their computer terminal than in face-to-face interactions (Scealy et al, 2003). An evaluation of Digital Heroes Campaign in the US revealed many youth actually preferred the semi-anonymous nature of e-mail, particularly in the beginning stages of the relationship (Saito & Sipe, 2003).

More general research has also shown that the Internet has a disinhibiting effect on users, leading to increased levels of honesty and self-disclosure. Furthermore, because the Internet is not a face-to-face environment, it is perceived by many users to be anonymous and non-threatening. It may therefore be appealing to 'socially unskilled' individuals who may not otherwise seek help (Miller & Griffiths, 2005).

2. Less prejudicial attitudes among mentors

E-mentoring results in the attenuation of status differences by concealing social cues that otherwise hinder communication between higher and lowers status individuals (Sproull & Keisler, 1992). This may be important in overcoming prejudices associated with accents, class background etc. Because of the physical separation of the participants, the process of matching mentees with suitable mentors is less concerned with personal characteristics than might be expected in a more traditional mentoring scheme (Sturgess & Kennedy, 2004).

50 Davis, I. & E. Stephenson (2006) 'Ten Trends to watch in 2006', *McKinsey Quarterly Premium Edition,* January 2006.

McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) refer to these features inhibiting interaction (such as age, accent, income and status) as 'gating features', and suggest that purely online relationships may be formed more easily than those with face-to-face contact, precisely because of the lack of these gating features.

3. The Bridging of Distance

One of the biggest challenges of face-to-face mentoring is the physical distance that often separates mentor and mentees. Stretched to their limits by their jobs and families, many volunteers find it difficult to consistently navigate their way to their mentees' schools or homes. By mentoring online, mentors eliminate this commute and have more time to focus on communicating with their mentees. Students may also be reluctant to commit to face-to-face meetings. For example, some students involved in the 2005 ***iTrack*** pilot reported that in their eyes, keeping up to date with their classes was more of a priority than attending face-to-face meetings and missing school. School facilitators on the program also referred to the strict 'excursion' guidelines now enforced by the Department of Education that made coordinating and organising venues and dates for face-to-face meetings frequently challenging. In their words, "The bureaucracy that has now developed even at the school level means approvals and variations to routines must go through a process." [51]

Lifting this constraint also enables mentors and mentees to connect with a much wider array of volunteers-freeing up mentoring coordinators to match mentors and mentees who share interests (a key factor in building relationships) as opposed to making matches by reason of physical proximity. Programs largely based on e-mail do make it possible to involve a wider array of mentors (e.g., corporate executives, busy parents, adults who travel a lot or are physically disabled) and mentees (incarcerated, in residential treatment facilities, rural) who would not otherwise participate (NMP, 2003).

On-line communication also removes time constraints, enabling mentees and mentors to connect more spontaneously. A teen's willingness to disclose is unpredictable they may have very little to say during a face-to-face meeting with their mentor (who just travelled across town to meet with them) yet feel compelled to make important disclosures late at night over e-mail (NMP, 2003).

iTrack student perspectives on face-to-face contact

According to the 2004 Evaluation of the ***iTrack*** program, all students felt the face-to-face meetings were important for their mentoring relationship, and some thought that the relationship would have benefited from more face-to-face meetings. When asked to elaborate on this aspect of the program, students frequently highlighted the visual element as being very important:

"It allowed me to see what my mentor looked like."

"It gives a mental picture of my mentor which makes it more enjoyable."

"It helped because it gave me a face to put with the words."

"It let me see who I was talking to."

Having a visual point of reference was evidently very important to the ***iTrack*** students' motivation and enjoyment of the program, but it is likely that this is not peculiar to face-to-face contact, and that a comparable impact may be achieved, for example, through the exchange of photographs online. Similarly, introducing more frequent, longer or informal introductory sessions for email communication between the mentor / mentee may help to meet the need for more 'personal' interaction also perceived by the students to be the other main benefit of face-to-face contact:

"You got to know your mentor on a personal level."

"So you get to see what kind of person he is."

"It helped to get to know each other."

Working out ways to stimulate deeper online engagement between the mentor / mentee may also help to avoid face-to-face meetings being too confronting, or in the words of one student, 'awkward and a bit intimidating'.

iTrack Mentor perspectives on face-to-face contact

Mentors in the 2004 iteration of ***iTrack*** overwhelmingly felt the face-to-face contact was a key element in building their relationship with their mentee.

"I gained more of an idea how she talked, she was very shy and meeting her face-to-face I saw a lot of her personality which I wouldn't have picked up on during our chat sessions."

"It made building rapport a quicker and easier process. Knowing what each other looked like made it more personal and relevant than the mentee being a faceless individual."

51 Preliminary findings from the 2005 ***iTrack*** pilot.

"It helped to generate a better understanding of each of our profiles and background, which in turn helped us to be more relaxed and open in subsequent chat sessions."

"A very necessary element of the program as we could have run out of things to chat about online if we hadn't met and chatted directly."

As with the students' comments, many of the benefits mentors attribute to face-to-face contact (such as getting to know their student better, knowing what they look like etc.) are not necessarily exclusive to this kind of contact, and may be achieved through other means.

Possible alternatives / substitute activities for face-to-face contact

This brief review of the literature suggests that face-to-face contact within a mentoring program, while evidently beneficial in many ways to the outcomes, is not necessarily vital to successful mentoring relationships. The critical factors would appear to be rather the overall aims and objectives of the mentoring program and the demographic backgrounds of the mentor / mentees. For example, researchers evaluating an online mutual-help group for people suffering from depression found that participants communicated in ways that were characteristic of face-to-face groups (high levels of support, acceptance and positive feelings) and that group involvement led to improvements in well-being (Salem et al, 1997). Other research has found that students who participate in online group discussions report greater cohesiveness within a learning group (Windschitl & Lesehm-Ackerman, 1997), learn more, and achieve higher grades than students taking part in face-to-face discussion groups (Althaus, 1997).

At the same time, the literature appears to insist that if face-to-face contact is either unavailable or undesirable, certain substitute elements should be incorporated into the program where possible to maximise the chances of successful 'human' relationships. These include:

- **Encouraging participants to build up a picture of their partner** – for example, by exchanging photos, visiting their website, keeping informal notes on them etc (APESMA, 2002).

- **Identifying aspects of behaviour that are associated with increased trust** and that may help to bridge this deficit, including agreed expectation of frequency of interaction, social (i.e. non-task related) communication, expression of enthusiasm for the task, and substantial and timely responses to the other's contributions (Jarvenpaar & Leidner, 1998).

- **Using instant messaging** to offer a potentially promising frontier for bridging weekly face-to-face relationships between weeks or over the summer. Indeed, researchers have recommended that programs seek ways to provide real-time communication opportunities.[52]

- **Using the tools available to clarify the message** (e.g. underline, bold, italicise). However, be vigilant about the tone of email communication and its potential for misinterpretation. Feedback needs to be very specific and delivered carefully. For example, the admonition, "That behaviour is not helpful," can mean different things depending on the emphasis placed on each word. Use your voice to say what you mean, clearly (Rosen, 2000).

- **Checking for understanding and reactions.** Because of all this possible misinterpretation, it becomes vitally important to check not only that the mentor / mentee has understood the message, but to check for reactions to the message. You can do this easily by saying something like, "It sounds like you are uncomfortable with... ," or "What do you think about what I've just said?" or "I'd like to check that we're in agreement, so can you tell me in your own words what we've decided would be a good next step?" (Rosen, 2000)

- **Summarizing at the end of meetings.** This is an excellent technique to use at any meeting, and especially important for a meeting in which you can't see each other. To make sure each partner leaves the meeting with the same understanding of what has transpired, what each must do next, when the next meeting will be, etc., get in the habit of summing up all this information in the last few minutes of your meeting time (Rosen, 2000).

- **Celebrating successes.** Use whatever means you can to celebrate even the smallest successes. Notes, e-mail and even an extra phone call can all work as pleasant reminders that you are committed to this relationship and happy with the way it's going (Rosen, 2000).

52 The Digital Heroes program was set up by People magazine and AOL Time Warner to "use the power of the Internet to pair prominent individuals with teens from under-served communities in on-line mentoring relationships" (see www.digitalheroes.org). Saito, R. N. & Sipe, C. L. (2003). E-mentoring: The digital heroes campaign Year Two Evaluation Results. Unpublished report prepared for MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership and AOL Time Warner Foundation.

Conclusion – *Taking iTrack forward*

The conclusions that can be drawn from this review are limited by both the paucity of the literature (in terms of both quality and quantity) and the relative newness of e-mentoring programs in general. While it is obvious that face-to-face contact can and does play an important part in cementing online relationships, the evidence for this is overwhelmingly tied to programs explicitly seeking to inspire emotional outcomes (such as increased self-esteem), as opposed to the ***iTrack*** program, which has an acute focus on facilitating and informing the school-to-work transition. This does not mean that emotional support does not constitute a part of programs like ***iTrack***, but that previous evaluations have suggested this element to be more of an indirect consequence than a reason for participation in itself. For example, the 2004 ***iTrack*** evaluation states that "students noted clear reasons for their involvement in the program. They wanted to learn more about careers and the workforce and felt the program would be a useful experience." In contrast, the mentors joined under more emotionally focused expectations 'to make a difference in a young person's life' and 'to give back to the community' (The Smith Family, 2005).

Following the conclusion of the 2004 pilot, it was found that 95% of the students felt that the program had helped with career / training advice and communication skills. The same majority also believed it had been beneficial to have an adult to talk to who was neither a parent or guardian, compared to just 31% who reported this as a motivating factor to join the program in the first place (The Smith Family, 2005). In other words, the 2004 pilot achieved its informative goals while at the same time producing a range of emotionally-supportive outcomes that, while very welcome, were more of a bonus addition to the program rather than qualifier of its success.

This distinction is important in light of the strongly positive connection raised in the literature between face-to-face contact and the quality of the mentor / mentee relationship. The 2004 pilot had face-to-face components, but lacked the analytical depth in evaluation to ascertain the extent to which these meetings were partly or solely responsible for the additional emotional outcomes (as the literature would imply). It is therefore equally difficult to say with any certainty whether taking face-to-face meetings out of the program would result in the reduction or even disappearance of these socio-emotional outcomes among students – or indeed whether this would negatively impact a program designed to achieve educational, rather than socio-emotional development.

In sum, the question of whether the ***iTrack*** program can / should be rolled out without face-to-face contact depends on how the program objectives and outcomes are prioritized. If the various methods discussed above to substitute face-to-face contact are incorporated into the program design and implementation, it is unlikely that the *educational* success of the program will be damaged in any significant way. If the *socio-emotional* aspect does falter in comparison – and this is by no means a certainty – it will be up to ***iTrack*** program managers to decide how far this sacrifice is justified with regard to the substantially greater numbers of students able to benefit from the wider roll-out of the pilot. In light of the admittedly small evidence base available and the existence of alternative 'relationship-building' strategies, it would appear that the benefits would nevertheless outweigh the drawbacks associated with taking out the face-to-face component. In fact, as some observers argue, technology is changing our lives in sometimes surprising and unpredictable ways, and that instead of viewing e-mentoring with regard to its predecessor (i.e. face-to-face mentoring), perhaps it should be understood on the basis of its unique qualities (Kealy & Mullen, 2003). In any regard, experimenting with a purely online model would in itself contribute valuable data and learning to the relatively poor evidence-base on e-mentoring currently available.

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Notes

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